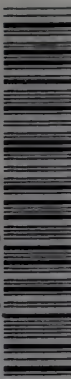


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VERNON'S AUNT

BY SARA JEANNETTE DUNCAN

(MRS EVERARD COTES)

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KNOCKED HIM DOWN

VERNON'S AUNT

BEING THE

Oriental Experiences of Miss Lavinia Moffat

BY

SARA JEANNETTE DUNCAN

(MRS EVERARD COTES)



WITH 47 ILLUSTRATIONS BY HAL HURST

London

CHATTO & WINDUS, PICCADILLY

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VERNON'S AUNT

CHAPTER I

H
THE idea of making a visit to my nephew, Vernon Hugo Hawkins, who lives in the North-West Provinces, India, and has an appointment in the Forest Department, came to me in the night. It was the night, to be quite accurate, of the fifteenth of November, 1892. I am perfectly certain about the date because it is down in my diary, recording the birth of the vicar's wife's seventh daughter, with some observations. All the afternoon I had been dressing dolls in early Victorian styles for a Zenana mission at a work party, while Letitia Bray read aloud a book of travels in the East, and when I went to bed

I found my imagination so taken up with Oriental matters that I could not sleep I tossed about for hours wrestling, so to speak, with cocoanut palms, and the sacred Ganges, and little heathen with nothing on. My mind was a chaos of temples to Krishna and Rampore chudders, mosques and nose-rings, Hindoo widows and Brahminy bulls. Strangely enough, the only Oriental object with which I was acquainted, Vernon Hawkins, did not occur to me until nearly two o'clock in the morning. With him, however, came the inspiration to make the journey; and I found repose in the determination to go myself and see whether the monkeys did break open the cocoanuts by throwing them down from the trees, whether victims really allowed themselves to be crushed by the wheels of the car of Juggernaut, and to what extent the natives actually were adopting our civilisation, our clothes, and the Thirty-nine Articles.

Next day I hesitated a little, never having been out of England before, and

asked Mr. Grule whether, in his opinion, I could undertake it with safety and propriety alone. Mr. Grule is the curate. He assured me that he thought I could absolutely. A sense of humour in a curate is not an advantage. Then I told the work party, which met on that occasion at my own house. We had guava jelly with our bread-and-butter to mark the occasion; and the reading of the travels in the East was illumined by my prospective information upon all points. Whenever an explanation was required Letitia Bray would exclaim, 'Oh, Miss Moffat can tell us—she is going there!' and I cannot say that I did not find this gratifying.

I had always seen a good deal of my nephew Vernon. I used to brush his hair when he wore it in curls, and endeavour to see that he was respectable when he went to church. At an early stage I became associated in his acquisitive young mind with tops and knives and marbles and unexpected pieces of

seed cake. After that I remember trying to make him understand in French that it was the shoemaker, and not the carpenter, who had the silk hat of the baker, and later I frequently directed his attention to his spelling. All this was pure virtue on my part, for I have cherished an unabated intolerance toward boys for nearly forty years, and Vernon Hawkins had all the characteristics of his species. He was precocious and noisy, and always wanted to see the insides of things. He did not understand a snub, and he hated a bath. He bird's-nested, tore his clothes, and once he drowned five kittens. The kittens had to be disposed of, but I would never have allowed it to be done by a relative. He slammed doors. His other friends were pleased to speak of him as a 'nice, good-hearted boy'; but all I know is that as soon as he had learned to keep himself reasonably clean and sustain more than a monosyllabic conversation, and enter a drawing-room without injury to the furniture, he took himself off

to India. I had written to him once or twice inquiring about certain missions in which I am specially interested, and in reply had received brief epistles descriptive of the weather and pig-sticking, but for eleven years I had not seen his face. It was this that determined me to give an element of unconventionality to my visit by not telling my nephew I was coming. It was thrilling to picture the meeting of an aunt with a nephew who might fail to recognise her. I was not afraid of any embarrassment on my own part. I remembered that Vernon had inherited the Moffat nose; I should have that to guide me, and I would know it anywhere in Asia; and I packed up with my black silk a small thin flexible cane, rather worn, to produce in case there was any difficulty about my own identity. I felt that I could rely upon Vernon's power of association when he should see it in my hand. I should have mentioned that when he was a boy Vernon was an orphan.

A variety of circumstances combined to

prevent my getting off as soon as I intended. My black silk came home with a yoke—but that is trivial—and had to go back seven times. Then I had to wait for the fortnightly meeting of the Dorcas Society, in order to see that my resignation as president was accepted with the proper amount of regret, and that Letitia Bray was *not* appointed in my place. Then I found that I could not depend upon the character of the people with whom I had placed my cat, and had to find another home for her. Then Mr. Grule took the measles, and, the vicar's wife having neither time nor attention for anything but the seventh daughter I have mentioned, there was nobody in all Littlehampton to look after him but me. He implored me not to stay on his account, and if it had been an ordinary curate I would have left him to his fate and Letitia Bray; but Mr. Grule was too valuable to me in the parish to be allowed to run the risk of taking cold by getting up too soon, or of premature and un-

suitable matrimony induced by the unnecessary attendance of Miss Bray. Finally, I



MR. GRULE TOOK THE MEASLES.

waited for the December *Leisure Hour* and *Sunday at Home*. I had the back numbers for two years, and I wanted these to complete the sets. I had made up my mind to take them out to my nephew as a little contribution to his stock of reading material. I had an idea that in India people were so much out of the way of current literature of any sort that Vernon wouldn't notice the dates. I added some socks, gloves, collars and ties, and would have liked to make additions to his wardrobe even more useful in their character; but there are boundaries, when one's nephew is grown up and one has not seen him for eleven years, which a maiden aunt can pass only in imagination.

In a journey to the Orient one is obliged to accomplish a large part of the distance by sea. While my own nautical experiences had been limited, I had once ridden on a switch-back in Brighton, and I knew I should loathe the ocean. So I took my ticket overland as far as Brindisi. I wanted, besides, to

see a little of gay France and sunny Italy. I am now convinced that the mail route is not a good one for this purpose. I knew from the time table when we had arrived at Paris, and as the train crawled around the city, I saw one lamp-lit street and a lot of tall dark houses—no boulevards and no cafés, no theatres or monuments. As we swept out of it again I ventured to inquire of a gentleman in the same compartment if that was the Seine—that river we were passing—and he said it was. I suppose it could not very well have been any other stream, but one likes to be quite certain of one's facts, especially of one's geographical facts. Looking back, my impressions of France do not seem to amount to much. I have more vivid ones of Italy, but they are not as poetic as I expected them to be. They cluster round the railway restaurants, and are bathed, as it were, in olive oil. They are inextricably mixed up with the natural wrath and indignation of the unprotected unmarried lady of middle age at being impu-

dently robbed. A central figure in them is that of an engaging *garçon*, young in years but old in villainy, who remarked '*C'est fait!*' when I gave him a sovereign, having no change, to pay for a glass of milk and a roll, and when I expostulated pretended not to understand and begged me to '*dépêcher,*' as the train was going. I rather flatter myself on my presence of mind on that occasion. I did '*dépêcher,*' but I took the sovereign with me. Three times I sent that *garçon* back for more change, and in the end he had to run after the train to hand me the nineteen francs through the window. I threw the sovereign out to him, and I suppose it is my duty to hope he got it; but it fell among a knot of disreputable-looking soldiers, and I think it is not improbable that I was the humble means of teaching one Italian waiter a lesson. There were vineyards certainly, and some pleasing old castles and cloisters, the identical castles and cloisters that I remember copying in my drawing book in

pencil at school—very nicely I used to shade them. The reality was not quite so picturesque, perhaps, as my drawing, but I was prepared for that, or would have been if I had thought of it. Something must be allowed for the imagination, and for my part I always take works of art with a pinch of salt. There were officers, too, at the various stations, just such Italian officers in cocked hats, and swords, and long cloaks as one reads of in novels, but, also judging from novels, I expected more from them in the way of impertinent advances than I saw. In works of fiction lady travellers through Italy are always subjected to stares and smiles, and sometimes undesirable attentions from these dark-eyed, much-moustached young men; but that I now believe a literary artifice. None that I saw seemed in the least audacious. There was the blue Adriatic certainly, dotted with three-cornered white sails, but there was also a large young man with a red tie and patent leather boots and a very dirty

shirt collar and a quantity of black curls, who smoked seven cigars as long as knitting-needles one after the other in my immediate vicinity the whole time this body of water was in view. He seemed very much wrapped up in himself, and when I touched him on the arm—I was obliged to—and said, ‘*Non fumare—s’il vous plaît*’—‘I object to tobacco,’ he merely looked at me absent-mindedly and shook his head. There is nothing like the kind of tobacco smoked in second-class Italian railway carriages to interfere with one’s appreciation of the scenery; and I regret to find few of my sentiments about the Adriatic worth putting on record.

I don’t know why I should ask an already satiated public to absorb further details of an Eastern voyage by P. and O. It is not that details are not available: my diary is full of them. I kept a diary, and wrote it up every evening after the stewards had cleared the saloon dining tables, sitting opposite the



THE VOYAGE BY P. AND O.

Bishop and dipping in the same ink-pot. I recorded my impressions of the Bishop under these circumstances, and I still remember the feeling of guilt with which I said 'After you, please,' when our pens clashed over the ink-pot, and I was in the midst of putting down the fact that it was easy to see he was a colonial Bishop by his calves. I could not get over the idea that I was committing a sin, though I have never been able to find a precedent for it and am still uncertain.

There is no use, for instance, in telling you what I thought of the lady who occupied my cabin with me—a widow, going out to India for the second time. I was really curious to know what could take a widow out to India for the second time, especially after I found out, without the smallest difficulty, that she was not interested in missions. But she never gave me a reason that I considered satisfactory. Her widowy effects, in dress, were very successful indeed, but she used to wear a band of crape where other people

wore ribbon, coquettishly twisted in her hair at the back, which I thought flippant. I used to sit and walk and play Halma a great deal with this widow, and helped to a very considerable extent to keep her out of mischief. I used to talk to her about Him, about his last days and his complications and his insurances and his little peculiarities, coming up and sitting beside her in her quiet corner of the hurricane deck whenever it began to grow dark and the second officer was off his watch. When the second officer was there first, I joined them and led the conversation into this channel until he went away. He was a mere boy, and she—well, she was a widow, and widows ought to be sustained and consoled, but not encouraged, in my opinion.

I became acquainted with a number of people—in fact, I made a point of knowing everybody. It is quite possible to do it, if one only uses a little tact, and makes up one's mind not to be too easily repelled by that insular stiffness which is so character-

istic of English people when they travel. With the Bishop, for instance, I always introduced the possibility of disestablishment or the last distinguished convert to the Church of Rome, or the wonderful way Dissent has taken root in the colonies. There were one or two colonels and their wives on board who had a military way of looking through their eye-glasses, which made them more difficult of approach than the other people, and with them I was obliged to use a great deal of discretion in selecting proper subjects for conversation. They really did look very warlike even in flannels and yellow shoes, so I began by asking them, as they stood yawning at one another behind the smoking-cabin, if they had kept any account of the number of savages they had killed in battle. It didn't seem that they had ; in fact, it presently appeared, greatly to my approbation, that they had become colonels without having gone to war at all. I had never before realised that this

was possible, and I congratulated them very warmly. I said that I wished all colonels and other military officers could say as much, but I feared there were few with records like theirs. I really felt my enthusiasm, but it seemed to fail to move them. So I changed the subject to military balls and the expenses of mess, and told them how I sympathised with the unfortunate subalterns who had to contribute. That, I remember, was the successful note with them. They looked at each other reproachfully and said it was a shame that I should be kept standing there, and immediately hurried off in different directions to find my chair. There was a young A.D.C. to somebody on board, a nice looking boy with very pretty manners. I used to adapt myself to him, too, talking to him pleasantly about his duties and proposing, whenever I found him half-dozing in his chair, with his hat tilted over his eyes, that we should have a game of deck quoits together. These games of ours used

to attract a great deal of attention among the other young men, who would gather round the bucket and applaud. Occasionally my partner would send a quoit straight at them. He was a very playful fellow.

There is a great deal too much indolence on board ship, and I used to try to stir people up. I would invite them, one after the other, to walk up and down the quarter-deck with me. I succeeded with perseverance, but they were very apathetic. I used to go cheerfully up to the Captain every morning and ask him what the weather was likely to be, and if it was probable that we should see any flying-fish before night. I wasn't really very much interested either in the weather or the flying-fish—Providence arranges these things and not sea-captains—but it is only considerate to talk to people about matters with which they are likely to be familiar.

One of my acquaintances was a literary man. I heard almost the first day I was about again that we had a literary man on

board, and I at once determined that no power on earth should induce me to forego the opportunity of speaking to him. He was Mr. Henry Hammerard; I dare say you are as familiar with the name as I was. I found Mr. Hammerard in a remote corner of the deck in a long chair, wrapped up to his eyes in rugs, and apparently asleep. A lemon and a glass containing a little brandy and water stood on the deck near him, and his right hand hung inertly at his side. It was fat and red and hairy, not the kind of hand I admire, but I looked at it with due respect, for it was a hand in the habit of wielding that which is mightier than the sword. As I said, he was apparently asleep, but I had already been long enough on board the *Oriental* to learn that one should never conclude that a person is sleeping merely because his eyes are shut. If I had gone on that principle, I should have had no conversation at all upon the voyage.

I paused near him, but his eyes remained closed. I summoned up my courage and I

said, 'Mr. Hammerard!' As I expected, they opened at once. I had decided on my opening sentence in the cabin as I was doing my hair.

'Mr. Hammerard,' I said, 'though personally unknown to you, I have felt that I must take the opportunity of telling you how much I admire your—your reputation.'

I could not properly say his books, because for the time being I was unable to remember the names of any of them. After all, it was quite proper, and not in the least familiar, to admire a gentleman's reputation. I was particularly anxious to avoid the appearance of any familiarity. Mr. Hammerard looked gratified, and his features relaxed into a faint smile. 'You are very good,' he said, 'you will excuse my—my not getting up,' and he closed his eyes again.

'*Please* don't mention it,' I begged him. 'I know what it is. One is not quite sure whether it is the roll or the pitch or the shaking of the screw or the smell of dinner.'

But it is quite possible to conquer it. I have conquered it. Walking about is the best thing, and willing. Come now, don't you think you could walk about a little ?'

'Oh thanks, I have conquered it,' Mr. Hammerard replied hastily. 'I—I am thinking of going down to luncheon.'

'I don't think you have,' I returned ; 'you look as if you might have a relapse. Try willing. Is your will as strong as your other mental parts, Mr. Hammerard ?'

'Yes, I believe so—no—really madam, I cannot possibly tell.'

'This would be an excellent test, and the result would be interesting not only to yourself but to the world,' I suggested. 'Fix your willing faculties on an intention to be, in ten minutes, perfectly well.'

Mr. Hammerard did not reply. 'I have no other mental parts which are likely to distinguish me,' I continued, 'but my own will is a very strong one. I will assist you,' and I looked at him fixedly, willing his immediate

recovery with all my might. Presently he broke the current, so to speak, by putting out his hand for the brandy and water, and I felt at liberty to resume the conversation.

‘One meets literary people so seldom,’ I said, ‘that it is a very great pleasure to talk with them. It makes something to remember afterwards,’ I added, a little shyly.

‘Yes?’ replied Mr. Hammerard. He seemed approaching a state of apathy, and I determined to rouse him.

‘Now, I have never read your books—our book club does not happen to contain them—but if ever I do it will be with twice the interest I otherwise should. Of course I don’t mean to say that they wouldn’t be *extremely* interesting in any case, but—I’m sure you must understand——’

‘Oh, yes! But I wouldn’t advise you to read them, madam. They’re not books for ladies.’

I rose from my seat immediately. There are certain subjects upon which I feel strongly,

and one of them is the tendency of modern fiction. I did my best to speak calmly, but my words trembled with indignation. 'Oh, indeed! Really! Then of course I won't, however much—— You need not *advise* me, thank you. I suppose you belong to the *realistic* school, Mr. Hammerard. You believe in writing immoral novels to raise the tone of public morality. I must say I do not agree with you. And I quite understand why it is that your works are not in our book club. But I wish you had mentioned it before.'

'So do I,' said Mr. Hammerard, drawing his rug up to his eyes as I turned to go. I was very deeply annoyed and could not possibly carry out my intention of asking him how many hours a day he spent in literary composition, and whether he wrote best in the morning or afternoon, and if his mother had had literary tastes, and what the recollections of his childhood were. One ought not to wish to know these things about people who write improper novels, and in the re-

vulsion of my feelings Mr. Hammerard might have been an anonymity for all I cared. You may imagine my relief when one of the other passengers remarked to me later in the day, 'I saw you talking to our distinguished author this morning. Did you tackle him about his books?'

I felt myself blushing. 'Certainly not,' I said, perhaps a little haughtily.

'They *are* rather dry,' continued the person who knew. 'Chiefly Mongolian histories, I believe; and then that last little thing of his in seven volumes—his "Handbook of the Aryan Dynasties"—how can the travelling public be expected to know anything about that?'

I should have liked very much to apologise to Mr. Hammerard after that, especially as I might have told him that an uncle of my mother's wrote a book on his travels in China, which I would have been very pleased to lend him. I would have been glad to know what he thought of literature as a pursuit for

ladies, too, and I had a manuscript with me at the time which I might have got his opinion on. But we had arrived at Bombay and were at the end of our voyage before another opportunity presented itself.

CHAPTER II

I MAY as well confess in the beginning that Bombay was a deep, keen, and bitter disappointment to me. I cannot now say quite what I expected, but it was something different—quite different. To begin with, I naturally looked for a coral strand—and there was a stone esplanade. My imagination had pictured a low sandy shore with a line of palm trees against the sky—this I acknowledge to be unreasonable—and I saw a mass of city buildings picked out with the masts of ships. Where I expected lordly temples I found a University and a Yacht Club, and instead of the dignified Brahmins, with flowing white robes, who had walked in procession through my dreams, I observed a large number of fat, intelligent-looking brown gentle-

men buttoned up to their chins in tight black coats and trousers, wearing the only thing in millinery uglier than an Englishman's silk hat—conical in shape, painted black and varnished, and set so far back on their heads that it was a simple marvel how it stayed on. The complication these gentlemen presented, when they wore wreaths of yellow marigolds round their necks, spoke excellent English, and carried gloves and umbrellas, was a shock to me. I had an experience on arriving, however, which temporarily blotted out all my earlier Eastern impressions, and which I cannot refer to even now without singular sensations. It is only at great expense to my feelings, and out of a desire to withhold nothing, that I have induced myself to consent to include it in my narrative.

As I stepped off the steam launch with my roll-up and my sun-umbrella and my two small bags—I was the last to leave it—a gentleman wearing an anxious expression, pale and narrow shouldered, with a stoop and

spectacles, rushed up to me so impetuously as nearly to knock me over into the water. He seized the roll-up and both the bags, and before I had time to inquire how he had found out that I was coming—the Moffat nose had undergone a climatic change, but I knew at once that it was my nephew—he had imprinted a salute upon my cheek. It was such a salute as a nephew might very properly offer to an aunt, but the circumstances were extremely public, and I would have drawn back if I could have done so without stepping into the ocean.

‘I am indeed pleased to see you!’ he remarked, with somewhat unnecessary nervousness. ‘To think of its being eleven years since I left you in England! How the time has gone!’

‘It has, indeed!’ I responded, allowing him to seize my arm and help me up the steps.

‘But you are just the same as ever!’ he continued. ‘Do you find me much changed?’

'I do indeed, my poor boy—dreadfully changed. No doubt it's the climate. You



DO YOU FIND ME MUCH CHANGED?

look as if you wanted beef tea and properly nourishing food, and I intend to see that you get it. It was thoughtful of you to come to meet me—I didn't expect you in the very least! I didn't even think you knew I was coming!

'*You* didn't write,' he said reproachfully, 'but John did.'

'John always was interfering!' I had never liked Vernon's brother John.

'And as I've been transferred to Bombay it was the simplest thing in the world for me to drive down to meet you. I was very nearly late, though; my memory is getting so bad!'

'Your memory!' I said with some asperity, for I never will put up with airs of that sort in people of my nephew's age. 'Rubbish! you didn't take after our family in that respect, but I've no doubt your memory is as good as it ever was!'

My nephew looked at me attentively for

a moment and sighed. 'They wrote me that you were quite better!' he said.

'So I am—perfectly well. Those nervous attacks of mine never last long.'

He did not answer, only looked at me fixedly from behind his spectacles in a way which made me feel uncomfortable. I had not anticipated the slightest embarrassment in meeting Vernon, but I began to experience it.

'Well,' I said pleasantly, as we got into a carriage driven by a black in a red coat and a white turban and bare feet, with another one standing up and clinging on behind. 'I expect we shall have to make acquaintance all over again, you and I.' I really felt that it would be so.

'We were together so little—before,' he replied, 'that I fear it may indeed be necessary!'

'Oh, I dare say it won't take long! But I don't know about our being together so little in the old days! Don't you remember

always spending your vacations with me? Dear me, I can hear you slamming through the house as if it were yesterday!

Vernon again remained silent, but he took off his spectacles and looked the other way—I fancied, to conceal his embarrassment. I began to feel truly anxious about my nephew.

‘We are going to a hotel at present,’ he remarked. ‘I have engaged rooms there for a month. I have my eye on a house at Malabar Hill overlooking the harbour—a nice quiet situation,’ and as we drove to the hotel I avoided reminiscences of all kinds, and questioned him entirely about the public buildings and the blacks.

‘Do you not remember ever to have seen it before?’ he asked me earnestly.

‘In pictures you mean! No, nothing really like it. Except, of course, the photographs you sent home when you first came out!’

He sighed again. ‘Well, I’m sure it’s a comfort that you know me!’ he said, and once

more relapsed into silence. My nephew had become much less entertaining than formerly, but I did not like to say so. It might be due to illness. We arrived at the hotel, which had a wide verandah and shops all round below, and Vernon took me upstairs to the rooms he had engaged. The place was teeming with blacks, and I met one coming out of my bedroom with an armful of pillows. I immediately went back to the sitting-room and informed Vernon.

‘What business has he in there?’ I demanded. ‘Send him away, please, and ring for the housemaid.’

Vernon looked at me sternly.

‘I’m afraid this is an affectation,’ he said. ‘You *must* know there are no housemaids here. That is Pedro, a very good Portuguese boy indeed, and he will see to everything for you. I will leave you now, as I am anxious to get the mail. Tiffin is at two.’ He then went away and left me to my sensations. They were singular—my nephew had turned out

so differently from what I expected. I accounted for it to myself in various ways, the most alarming of which was an idea



MET ONE COMING OUT OF MY BEDROOM.

which continued to haunt me, that he had become a Mahomedan. If that proved to be the case, I determined to return to England at once. Pedro was still in the bedroom,

beating pillows and walking about flicking the dust off the furniture with a cloth—I made up my mind that I would very soon cure him of *that* trick—so to calm myself I began to unpack a few things in the sitting-room. Where Vernon had picked up those imperative ways puzzled me more than anything. I may as well say here that the commanding manner in other people is something I am not accustomed to. I found my alpaca a good deal crushed, and was in the act of shaking it out when I heard an excited step at the door and a knock—one of those knocks which give upon your nerves, as the French say. I called out ‘Come in!’ and the door opened to disclose Vernon with his hat on the side of his head, and every mark of haste and demoralisation. He carried an open letter in his hand, and seemed disposed to hesitate upon the threshold. But he was making a draught, so I told him to come in at once and shut the door.

‘What is the matter?’ I asked; ‘are you



THE DOOR OPENED.

in any difficulty? If so, as I used to tell you when you were a good deal younger than you are now, it is much better to speak out and have done with it.'

Vernon wiped the perspiration from his brow, and did as he was told. 'I am indeed in a difficulty,' he said, looking from me to the letter and back again to me.

The solution of the mystery flashed upon me in the twentieth part of a second. My nephew had a wife, whose existence he was anxious to conceal, and who now objected to my coming out to keep house for him!

'Vernon!' said I sternly, 'tell the truth at once! Have you been getting married?'

'Oh *Lord!*' said my nephew, leaning back on the sofa and covering the bald spot on the back of his head with his hand. I could see that behind his spectacles his eyes were very wild. He paused for a moment, looked at me steadily, and then seemed to collect himself. 'In any case,' he said, 'the best plan will be to rehearse it to you from

the beginning. If I am right, it may help your memory ; if I am wrong, it can do no harm.'

'No riddles or conundrums, please,' I replied—'the simple truth.'



'OH LORD !' SAID MY NEPHEW.

'Eleven years ago I married,' said Vernon, watching me steadily, 'a lady older than myself, by the name of White. She was not prepossessing, but she had singular

intelligence. I expected when I married her that she would relieve me of a great deal of the burden of my official reports.'

'You never could spell!' I interrupted. 'But go on. I am still prepared to assist you in that direction.'

'*Still* prepared,' he repeated anxiously. 'Are you beginning to remember?'

Vernon had certainly been too long in the country. 'I remember more than you give me credit for,' I replied tersely. '*Go on!*'

'Unfortunately, three months after our marriage my wife exposed herself imprudently, and had a sunstroke. It made her perfectly useless to give any assistance in my official labours, and it developed in her a curious dislike to me. She grew worse and worse, and finally her mind became completely unhinged and she lost her memory. Under these trying circumstances, I took her home to England and left her there. She has recently written to me that she wished to come out again, and as my relatives have

been reporting her as completely restored, and my official work has lately much increased, I was induced to give my consent. And I was expecting her by the steamer that brought you !'

' I don't wonder at your embarrassment at meeting me instead. It grows clear to me now ! Your expecting me was but a pretence, invented at the spur of the moment ! I *knew* John hadn't written ! Yet I thought I had brought you up to speak the truth, my boy !'

' If you interrupt me again, madam, I shall go raving mad.'

I closed my lips firmly, and bowed. My nephew was evidently unwell, and I determined to control myself—at least, until he should be better.

' I have just received by the mail which brought you, this letter, and in it John says : " I am sorry to inform you that your wife has had a bad turn at the last moment, and that all the good effects of absence from you in a

non-official atmosphere seem to be undone. She is perfectly sensible about other things, but she has again fallen a victim to her former antipathy to you personally and to curious aberrations of memory, and at the present writing nothing will induce her to start. Her boxes are all packed and her bonnet actually on. The cab is at the door to take her to the station, and it is quite possible that she may change her mind at the last moment and go ; but I write just in time to catch the mail to explain to you how matters stand, so that you need not be unnecessarily anxious should she fail to appear.”

As my nephew read, I began to feel a certain amount of sympathy for him. His position was really an unfortunate one. His deceitful conduct had brought its own punishment, and I determined not to be hard upon him.

‘I can only say,’ I replied, ‘that it ought to be a warning to you against allowing any

official consideration to enter into your choice of a partner for life, though I am afraid the warning will be more useful now to other people. But as things are, it seems to me that it is just as well for you that it is I who came by the steamer, and not your wife.'

My nephew groaned. 'I used to have the same difficulty in convincing you before,' he said unhappily. 'Unfortunate woman, you *are* my wife.'

[I saw that his mind had given way to the climate, and my own madness in coming out to a nephew who had lived eleven years in India, without first ascertaining his continued sanity, flashed upon me. But it was a trying moment, and the only thing I could think of to say was that I could not possibly be his wife, since I was his aunt. Vernon stared at me helplessly. 'You used to say you were my grandmother—there is no reason why you should not now say you are my aunt.'

All at once a suspicion of the terrible truth came upon me. I am not a fainting

character, but I must own to a certain dizziness as I looked for Vernon's mole—a prominent particular excrescence above his left eyebrow, which had somehow never occurred to me before.

‘It is not there!’ I exclaimed, and covered my face with my hands. I was, at that moment, nearer to the borders of hysteria than I have ever been before or since.

‘What is not there?’

‘Your mole—the mole on my nephew's forehead. You cannot be he?’

‘I wish there were as much reason to believe that you cannot be she,’ he returned with apathy. ‘I have no mole. I never had any mole. But it is like you to say I had one. You used to declare that I squinted, and wore a wig!’

At these words the situation dawned upon me in all its unconventionality, if that is not too strong a term, and I received an impression of the possible consequences of wanting to surprise people that has never left me.

Without saying anything, I rose to my feet and began repacking my boxes. I felt that I would rather write my explanation, and receive his apology in the same way. I would repack, and quietly go downstairs and ask the hotel clerk for other rooms. To my horror the gentleman who was not my nephew rose to his feet also, and locked the door, putting the key in his pocket.

‘Sir,’ I said, ‘you may as well understand at once that I am not your demented wife—poor creature! I, also, have been the victim of a mistake. I took you for my nephew, whom I have not seen for eleven years and whom I have come out to visit. My name is Lavinia Moffat. I have no desire, however, to know what yours is. I only ask that you leave this apartment immediately—it is no place for you under the circumstances.’

He looked at me undecidedly, but he did not move. ‘I hope devoutly that what you say may be true,’ he remarked, ‘but you see my position. You are extremely like my

wife—Mrs. James W. Jamieson—in feature, and you behave precisely as I should expect



HE LOOKED AT ME FIXEDLY.

her to do under a return of her old malady. In which case, it is my bounden duty to see

that you remain here and come to no harm. Besides, if I allow you your liberty now, who knows what your disordered imagination may express regarding me personally ?'

He replaced the letter in his pocket, crossed his hands on the top of his stick, and looked at me fixedly. We had both become calmer.

'I myself am convinced that you are the lady I married,' said Mr. James W. Jamieson. 'It is for you to uproot that conviction.'

'I assure you that before stepping ashore I never laid eyes on you !' I exclaimed. The circumstances did not permit the choice of elegant forms of speech.

He only looked incredulous.

I spread out my two hands before him. 'Where is my wedding-ring ?' I cried.

'You might easily have thrown it into the ocean,' said Mr. Jamieson.

'I don't know anyone in Bombay——'

'You never did.'

'Sir, if you do not at once unlock that door

and permit me—Lavinia Moffat, of Littlehampton, Sussex—to go downstairs and find out when the first train goes to Rajabad, North-West Provinces, I will put my head out of the window and call aloud that I am being forcibly detained here by James W. Jamieson, who insults me by the statement that I have been married to him for eleven years. Here is my handkerchief,’ I added, with an inspiration, ‘you can see it is marked “L. M.”’

He waved the handkerchief aside. ‘That might be anything,’ he said, looking at the monogram, but he appeared to meditate.

‘I would not put my head out of the window, if I were you,’ he said. ‘It would be so very public.’

‘That is what I want it to be,’ I replied, with some heat, for I was beginning to lose patience.

‘You mentioned Littlehampton, Sussex,’ said Mr. Jamieson slowly. ‘Can you tell me the name of the High Sheriff of Sussex?’

‘ Mr. Shoreley Shore!’ I replied promptly.

‘ Right. Can you mention any three of the leading county families?’

‘ A dozen, if you like. The Tyke-Symonds, the Belshammers, Sir Jacob Ezra, those Americans who have taken Lord Lambley’s place——’

‘ That will do. How does Littlehampton lie with reference to the railway, and what are its chief features?’

‘ Five miles from the station. The main street is crooked at one end, and divides into two at the other to embrace the market-place. Its chief features are the church, the vicarage, Holly Cottage—my own house—Mrs. Dodd’s shop for fancy goods and post office combined, Jenkins and Carters’, the drapers’ shop——’

‘ Thank you. Can you tell me the name of the leading doctor?’

‘ Jobson.’

‘ Jobson—yes, quite correct. I once

spent several weeks in Littlehampton, madam, and, although I fail to remember Mrs. Dodd or the draper, I find that in other respects your account of the place is entirely accurate. My wife has never visited the locality. I therefore withdraw my statement that you are Mrs. Jamieson. I feel that I ought to offer you some reparation for the inconvenience I have caused you——'

'You might unlock the door and go,' I suggested.

'But you see how it was. On the whole, I am relieved to find that I am wrong,' said Mr. Jamieson, looking at me earnestly. 'Things might have been worse—much worse,' he went on, somewhat ambiguously, 'but the resemblance is very striking. However, your acquaintance with Littlehampton is conclusive. I apologise, I am sure. And if there is anything I can do to make your stay in Bombay more interesting, I hope you will command me.'

'I have already commanded you, sir, to

render me the only service in your power,' said I—rather finely I think, considering the state of my feelings.



I POINTED TO THE DOOR.

‘And that is——’

I pointed to the door, and Mr. Jamieson seemed to realise that I wished to be alone.

He picked up his hat, and offered me the hand which he had charged me with having accepted eleven years before. But I was putting my head out of the window.

‘I will then say good-morning, madam,’

F.A

Class. (in full.) INDIAN TELEGRAPHS. To (Office)

Receipt for an Inland Telegram.

NOTHING TO BE WRITTEN BY THE SENDER ABOVE THIS LINE.

To (Telegraph Office) Rajabad	From (Telegraph Office) Bombay
(Person) J. H. Hawkins Esq.	(Person) L. Moffat
(Address) Depty. Conservator of Forests Rajabad	Use words whether your telegram is State or Private. Unless directed State by sender, it will be sent as Private, and no charge or refusal is afterwards admissible. Use words whether your telegram is to be sent URGENT, ORDINARY or DEFERRED.

Your	Aunt	Miss	Lavinia
Moffat	has	arrived	in
India	and	leaves	by
tonight's	train	for	Rajabad

NOTHING TO BE WRITTEN ON THE BACK.—CONTINUE ON ANOTHER FORM.

Sent to	I.N.	Sender's Signature and Address or Designation (No numeral)
Ct	How	By

Lavinia Moffat
Apollo Bunder Hotel
Bombay

he said; ‘I hope there is no ill-feeling. It is by the merest accident, after all, that you are not Mrs. Jamieson. Perhaps we had better not speak of this. I should not like it to get about in—ah—official circles.’

'Hi—you!' I shouted down into the street, and in an instant I was alone with my emotions.

Two hours later I despatched the accompanying telegram to Vernon Hawkins.

CHAPTER III

My journey to Rajabad was not in any way remarkable, except for the time it took. It took an enormous amount of time—two days—to a very short distance on the map. This had its advantages; one had so many more favourable opportunities for observation than are to be obtained in an ordinary English train, that seems to be despatched for the mere purpose of getting from one place to another. As we passed through the country I could look out of the window and see the whole of rural India slowly gyrating round a palm tree on the horizon. I could examine the architectural details of the small temples made of mud and whitewashed, with an inferior kind of decoration, apparently in pink or yellow sugar, round the base of their domes,

that cropped up out of the ground here and there as we went by. I could count the tail feathers of the bluejays that sat on the telegraph lines, and observe the curious configuration of the humped Indian cows that tried in vain to induce us to keep up with them. I was enabled to make a fair estimate of the population of the innumerable little villages we passed, odds and ends of brown thatched huts up to their ears in green millet and yellow wheat, and I usually counted three old women, five babies, four goats, and two pariah dogs. When we stopped we stopped at small whitewashed stations with strange names staring through the sunlight in black painted letters, and the platform was full of native people in the most original clothes of the most variegated colours, all talking together and running in every direction at once. I never saw such excitement or such patterns. Stripes were the most popular—purple and yellow, green and yellow, black and yellow—and I saw satin coats without

sleeves embroidered in gold, in connection with the most dirty and disreputable white cotton nether garments of extremely peculiar cut. The crowd consisted almost altogether of men, and amongst them I noticed some wearing turbans like beer-kegs, and long beards, while others were less dignified but more jaunty in little round embroidered caps that would make lovely work-baskets with a bit of silesia to stiffen them and a handle and a bow at one side, and moustaches. But whether it was cap or turban, beard or moustache, the head that wore it was wagging as if nothing would ever stop it, in the course of a conversation addressed to nobody in particular and about nothing that I could find out, for the train moved on after perhaps three people had come aboard as a rule, leaving the rest of the multitude still running round and calling each other names. Not that there was not abundance of time for everybody to get comfortably into the carriages. In the interval between our

arrival and our departure they might have taken tickets for anywhere with explanations all along the route, they might have forgotten something and gone home to fetch it, they might have bidden farewell to every relative they had on earth six times over. There was really no occasion for hurry. After the train had lain stretching and yawning in the sun beside the station for a while, a bell rang, and the babel immediately grew louder and more undecided than ever. Time went on, and as soon as we had well forgotten the first bell, another rang, and the babel became a turmoil. In the midst of it a fat man with a coat that had once been white, and a complexion to match, with buttons, and an air of authority, would issue forth from the telegraph office or the refreshment room and walk up and down the platform to ascertain, apparently, whether the train had sufficiently recovered from its fatigue to proceed further. Then the three passengers who had seated themselves would make

up their minds to change their carriages, and the multitude would unite in helping them out with their bags and bundles. At this, the fat gentleman in buttons would become very angry, and it would suddenly appear that we were in a tremendous hurry, and the three passengers would be hustled into the carriage of their final selection without ceremony and the door shut tight upon them. Then the gentleman in buttons would once more promenade authoritatively up and down, wave his hand at the engine, and light a cigar as we crawled away from him. After which, if we were not obliged to go back for anything, we usually rushed along at the rate of at least fifteen miles an hour until we came to the next station on the time table. It was not always entirely heathen and unpronounceable; sometimes it was a place one knew the name of, like Ahmedabad or Ajmere, and then the vari-coloured native crowd on the platform would be interspersed with a very few English people, pale-faced ladies of my own age

in sailor hats and cotton blouses and serge skirts—it is extraordinary the temerity with which women over forty in India will wear sailor hats and cotton blouses—a man or two in riding things, and a soldier in uniform, perhaps, leading a vicious-looking white bulldog by a string. I did not find any of these people conversational when they happened to get into my carriage. I could get them to tell me nothing about India. One lady did not even know the population of the North-West Provinces or the meanings of the marks on the people's foreheads. I asked her if the upper classes were not cultured and educated, and she said she supposed so; but she admitted that she never invited any natives to her house. When I pressed her for the reason she said—somewhat weakly, I thought—that her husband wouldn't allow her to have anything to do with them; and when I remarked that he was probably prejudiced, she said no, that he was exactly like everybody else's husband. And when three very

respectable-looking Indian gentlemen got into the carriage, she left it and went into the ladies' compartment, where there were already four other women, an ayah, and two babies.

To my disappointment, none of the Indian gentlemen spoke English. Such an opportunity for acquiring information about the country as was presented then never reoccurred—that is to say, if they had spoken English. But they could only bow and smile in answer to my inquiries, and this they did with great unanimity, as if I had spoken to them all at once. It was a great pity, there were so many things I should have liked to discuss with them—child marriage, the Hindoo widow question, and the opium trade, for instance ; but there was no helping it. I had to be content with the bows and the smiles. They were so very polite that I confess I felt a little annoyed when, after buying some sticky brown pancakes from a man who carried them about on a flat wicker tray, they pinned a sheet

across a corner of the carriage and got behind it to eat them, as I have reason to believe that it was done solely on my account. I had not the slightest desire to interfere with them in any way, and it would have been an innocent pleasure, surely, to see three Indian gentlemen at a meal. But they did not seem to wish it, and, with every desire to treat these people as friends and equals, I simply fumed on the other side of that sheet.

Talking of meals, I ought not to omit that special advantage of railway travelling in India—one is allowed a reasonable time to order them, to eat them, and to pay for them. They seemed to me to occur about every half-hour during the day—tea and toast to begin with, then breakfast, then luncheon, in the middle of the afternoon a cup of tea, and then dinner at any time between seven and nine that a big station happened to be convenient. It was quite sociable and pleasant; the train rolled into

the station, and we all trooped out past the rose bushes of the station-house garden, and the stalls where they sold cheap novels or carved wood or brass bowls or peacock feather fans, to the refreshment room, where the table always had flowers on it and the native waiters were inordinately grateful for twopence. The eastern salaam is very beautiful, and for a time I thought the feeling of gracious superiority it imparted cheap at twopence. Later, I concluded that one could spend one's entire income just as easily in twopences as in any other way, and that a billionaire could do it in the course of a brief journey through India without exhausting the supply of salaams available. Humility is cheap enough in the Oriental individual, but in the aggregate it has to be taken seriously.

I discovered just before arriving at Rajabad, however, that things are not always what they seem in Indian railway restaurants. If I had known what I found out at Jiminipore, I would have supported existence the

whole way from Bombay on oatmeal biscuits and soda-water varied by a little quinine. We had stopped at Jiminipore, and I was conversing with a young man who seemed more communicative than the usual Anglo-Indian. Later on it appeared that he was a traveller for a Calcutta jewellery firm, but that, of course, did not affect his value as a source of information, while it made him, I suppose, even more respectful in his manner than he would otherwise have been. He had been complaining a good deal about being obliged to live in India, saying, among other reckless things, that he would give a year of his present existence for a week in Bayswater or Putney, and I had been rebuking him to the best of my ability. Nothing is more annoying in India than the persistence with which people lament their fate in living there, and shut their eyes to the blessings, not to say the luxuries, which they enjoy. I had been speaking very plainly to this young man.

'You certainly cannot complain of your food,' I remarked, as we began dinner. 'Better soup than this I have never tasted in my own house in England.'

'Oh, it tastes all right,' responded the young man, 'and I dare say it doesn't kill many people before they get used to it.'

Instinctively I lowered the spoonful at my lips. 'What is the matter with it?' I demanded.

'Oh, I guess it would be all right if it weren't for the baccilly.'

'Baccilli!' said I, replacing my spoonful.

'That's what I said, madam—baccilly. If you just look at it you'll find it's swarming with baccilly, though most of them are dead, having been boiled—and there's any amount of invisible ones.'

'Then why do you eat it?' I inquired, allowing the waiter to take away my plate.

'I've been vaccinated,' he replied, oracularly. 'There isn't any kind of baccilly that can hurt me. Government will do it for you,

madam, if you apply, but it's very uncomfortable while it's takin'.'

I did not notice until I had finished my fish, which was particularly nice, that he had refused it.

'You don't seem to care for fish,' I remarked.

'No,' he said, but his manner excited my suspicions.

'Would you mind telling me why?'

'I'd rather not, madam. You have just been assisted to fish. I'd rather you didn't ask me'

'But I insist on knowing.'

'Well, madam, all I can say is, don't blame me. The fact is, I don't mind bacilly in any form, but I can't stand dead Hindoo.'

'Dead *Hindoo!*'

'Yes, madam, dead and in the sacred river till they're gamey enough for this particular kind of fish to really enjoy. I draw the line there.'

I might have told that Calcutta commercial

traveller that if he had given me this information earlier, he would have been remembered in my will. As it was, I kept silence. There was absolutely nothing to be done.

‘I *think* you’ll find this all right, madam,’ the young man said, helping himself to mutton, ‘but I wouldn’t recommend the beans. They say they turn ’em that nice green colour with arsenic.’

I took some mutton, but failed to enjoy it. Nothing could obliterate the memory of the fish. When the next course came I decided of my own accord that no one could possibly know what had gone into it, and refrained ; but there was a simple rice pudding, and I helped myself plentifully.

‘There *can’t* be any harm in this,’ I said to the young man, who was eating plum tart instead.

‘Glad you think so, madam,’ said he. ‘In this country we believe that rice puddings spell germs, which is only a scientific term for bacilly.’

‘They come from the cow that supplies the milk,’ he went on, seeing me look startled. ‘I don’t want to spoil your appetite, madam, but I ought to tell you that the cows in this country are literally full of germs——’

I don’t know what facts I might have elicited from him about the cheese and the dessert, but at this point I paid my bill and went back to my seat. He seemed to be a well-informed young man, but I was not entirely sorry when I saw him get into the smoking carriage after dinner. He was really rather vulgar, and I have never since felt any confidence in addressing young men in railway restaurants whom I have reason to suspect of being in the jewellery line.

In the course of time and before the beginning of eternity we arrived at Rajabad. I need not have been so cautious about getting out of the carriage and looking well about me, and determining not to so much as shake hands with any gentleman before demanding to see my telegram and the mole

on his forehead—my nephew was not there. Not a person with a white skin was to be seen anywhere, and I walked up and down the platform three times, with an eye on all points of the compass. So far as I could observe, Rajabad was a small station-house and a name, with two water-carriers and five coolies, every individual one of whom was sitting upon my luggage with a view to establishing the fact that he had brought it out of the carriage. Around the station-house stretched an expanse of sun-lit desolation with two or three roads struggling through it in various directions; and here and there a patch of jungle or a peepul tree. Knowing, as I did, that I was in India, my feeling was that I would not venture off the platform alone for anything the world could give me—and it would obviously be necessary to get to a town of some sort before night, for Rajabad offered no accommodation to a maiden lady from England but a dusty bench and a telegraph office. The telegraph office

native clerk, and he had preposterously little on. Besides, there seemed to be no available means of arousing him except by pinching him; and I beg you to picture the insuperable difficulty of pinching an unconscious young Indian gentleman in such undeniable *déshabillé* felt by a maiden lady from England travelling alone, and unable to depend upon his knowing her language. I determined to wait with what patience I had left until he should wake up of his own accord, and walked out on the platform again, feeling excessively annoyed at my nephew. In the first place, he had allowed himself to be personated by a would-be bigamist, and in the second he had abandoned his only living female relative to the wild beasts of India without any other protection than a sun-umbrella. It was excessively unfeeling.

Suddenly my attention was attracted by a dark spot in the distance upon the road. It was moving, moving rapidly, in the direction of the station. As it came nearer it looked

like an animated barn, and it had approached within a quarter of a mile before I could be certain that it belonged to the animal kingdom. Then in the twinkling of an eye my worst fears were realised. I saw that the creature had four large unwieldy legs, two great flapping ears, and a trunk—that it was, in a word, an elephant, and that it was travelling toward me with a momentum of which I never thought an elephant capable. As I look back my Oriental experiences seem to crystallise into the awful moment when I awaited the onslaught of that formidable beast. Two alternatives presented themselves to me, either to fly for shelter into the telegraph office, or to open my sun-umbrella in the face of the advancing animal with a view to imparting some of my own terror to him, but I was incapable of doing either—I was frozen to the spot. My whole life did not pass in review before me, as is customary upon such occasions. I was entirely occupied in speculating as to the

precise arc I should describe in the air when the elephant picked me up with his trunk. I believe I was under the impression that he would toss me over his head and then sit on me. Above all and over all, I was conscious of a boiling wrath with my nephew Vernon Hugo Hawkins, who must, I concluded instantaneously, have wished to deceive me for some nefarious end when he said that he lived at Rajabad.

And the elephant, absorbing more and more of the perspective, steadily advanced.

CHAPTER IV

AN instant later I observed that the animal was being ridden by a man who sat just behind its ears, and that it was not, so to speak, all elephant, but consisted partly of an erection, presumably dissociable, on its back. This somehow gave me courage to shriek. I shrieked violently, and turning, almost ran into the arms of my preserver, a Mahomedan gentleman in a green cap, spectacles, and whiskers. I have never before realised the force of the adage that truth is stranger than fiction; but I ask you if anything could have been more remarkable than that I—Lavinia Moffat, of Littlehampton, Sussex—should find myself on a desolate railway platform in the middle of Northern India, defended against an oncoming elephant

by a Mahomedan gentleman in a green cap, spectacles, and whiskers? He did not come from anywhere, he simply appeared,



INTO THE ARMS OF MY PRESERVER.

and I was too deeply gratified to see him to ask him for an account of himself.

The Mahomedan gentleman, when he had recovered from the shock of our con-

cussion, salaamed. I fear he thought the bow with which I returned his salutation very abrupt, but there was no time for idle ceremony.

'Are you aware, sir,' said I, 'that there is an elephant approaching, and that the telegraph operator is asleep?'

'Oyessir! He is always issleeping, that offiss baboo! But if the elephant brings a telegram, then he will awake.'

At this moment the elephant's trunk preceded him round the corner of the station-house, and I involuntarily got behind my preserver, who instantly faced round with a reassuring smile.

'Do *not* be afraid! It is *not* alarming! If there was danger I would not myself stand here in this place! It is not a wild elephant, it is not *musth*.¹ It is domesticated by the hand of man! Oyessir!—yess, madam! Also, you may rely upon me, madam. I will defend you!'

¹ Mad.

I looked the Mahomedan gentleman in the face. It was a face full of amiability, of sincerity, and at that moment of devotion to me.

'I believe you will,' I said. 'I believe I may trust you!' and I gave him my hand. He took it with some embarrassment, but shook it warmly. The elephant by this time had come up to within ten yards of us, and was standing, like a church, beside the end of the platform. I privately determined that so long as he did not attempt to come upon the platform I would control myself. The Mahomedan gentleman made a step or two in the direction of the animal, but I detained him.

'I would rather,' I said, 'you did not leave me!' His face at once lighted up with pride and happiness.

'I do not go,' he replied. 'I think it is the elephan' of Mr. Ockinis, but I do not go! I remain forever—till *six* o'clock!—if I can be of use to madam!' and the expressive glance with which he accom-

panied these words made me feel that I already had one attached friend in India. I was about to murmur my thanks when a native, who had descended from the box on the back of the elephant, came running up to where we stood. He salaamed to us both, but very deeply to me, and it was to me that he spoke, though I assured him several times that I did not understand Hindustani. He jabbered on and would not be interrupted, for two or three minutes, when he finished up by abruptly prostrating himself upon the platform and endeavouring to put my foot on his head, which struck me as an unpleasant kind of liberty, though doubtless well intentioned. I drew my feet back one after the other, and assumed a commanding manner which I have kept with me for years as a provision against an emergency of this sort. I was distinctly gratified to find a use for it at last.

‘Tell him to get up at once,’ I said to my preserver, and in a moment the man was

on his feet explaining himself, with great volubility, to the Mahomedan gentleman.

‘It is the elephant’ of Mr. Ockinis, and this is the servant of Mr. Ockinis——’

‘Well,’ I said, ‘if this were a civilised



PUT MY FOOT ON HIS HEAD.

country Mr. Ockinis's elephant would be put in the pound. I would do it myself.'

‘Mr. Ockinis has sent his elephant’ for his

female relative. May I ask, madam, if you are the female relative of Mr. Ockinis ?'

I put myself immediately upon my guard. 'Female relative' was vague. 'I don't know,' I said, 'I may be'—which has since struck me as being rather neat from a diplomatic point of view.

The Mahomedan gentleman looked puzzled, as I intended he should.

'Thiss man says Mr. Ockinis gave him a letter for his female relative, but the elephan' has eaten it !'

'Preposterous !' said I.

'I also, I do not believe him,' rejoined my preserver. 'He says the sahib is at Nuddiwalla—that is from here *fifteen* miles. He says he left Nuddiwalla yesterday at five o'clock, to feed the elephan' and sleep at Chotagurh. He was giving the elephan' the sugar cane, and he had the letter in his hand. The elephan' took all—one second !—it was eaten entirely ! He says he is a poor man with seven children and two mother-in-

laws. Myself, I think he was drunk at Chota-gurh and lost the letter, and I think he has a great cheeks to say this infernal lie.'

His language was startling, but the Mahomedan gentleman spoke quite calmly. The truth began to dawn upon me, but before allowing it to dawn entirely I decided to try a little cross-examination. 'Ask him, please,' said I, 'the name of the lady to whom the letter was addressed.'

'He says it was "Eemuffitty Miss-sahib"—Miss Eemuffitty—the female relative of Mr. Ockinis.'

I could think of nothing but an absurd nursery rhyme for the moment, and I further mystified the Mahomedan gentleman by exclaiming, 'Lawks a mussy on us! This is none of I!'

'My name is Moffat,' I continued, 'and my nephew's name is Hawkins—Vernon Hugo Hawkins, of the Forest Department.'

Certainlee—then it is alright! Mr. Ockinis is in camp at Nuddiwalla. He is a

most nice gentleman. Only yesterday I have seen him.'

I reflected. The mystery was clearing up, but I would not allow it to clear too rapidly. 'Excuse me,' I said, 'but will you kindly pronounce the name "Hawkins"?''

'Oh, very well I know the name, madam—Ockinis sahib—everyone in Rajabad will know that name.'

'Mr. *Hawkins*,' I said again.

'Mr. *Awkinis*,' repeated the Mahomedan gentleman.

'No,' I said, 'you can't do it, but I see what you mean. Now, will you kindly say "Miss Moffat"?''

'Miss Eemuffitty,' he replied, looking so hurt that I felt obliged to apologise.

'If you knew what I have gone through,' I said, 'on account of my identity, you would understand my desire to take every precaution,' and I paused. If I seem to have deliberated a great deal on the platform at Rajabad, the reader will accept the same

assurance that I gave to the Mahomedan gentleman. It now appeared reasonably clear that my nephew had changed his place of residence, and, being prevented from coming to meet me himself, had sent a servant and an elephant and a letter. The servant and the elephant were before me, but the most important link in the chain of evidence was missing, and it was not in the nature of compensation to be told that it had come also, but was inside the elephant. As my preserver had assured me that this animal was harmless, I walked a few steps in his direction and looked at him. He seemed to be thinking deeply, probably considering the contents of my nephew's communication. As I approached he appeared to wink, and, slowly picking up his trunk, he twisted it above his back and blew a quantity of sand out of it over his person, which he seemed to find refreshing. There was absolutely nothing in his conduct, however, to afford any clue to the situation, which I men-

tally determined to accept. In the meantime the Mahomedan gentleman had been talking earnestly with the servant, and as I came up again he made me a very low bow and presented me with his card. It was a gilt-edged card, highly-glazed ; it smelt of scented soap, and the name delicately traced on it was 'Abdul Karim Bux.'

'I am much honoured to make the acquaintance of madam,' said he, as I accepted it.

'Well,' I responded, 'as the Americans say, I'm sure I'm very pleased to meet you, Mr. Bux ; you have already been of very great service—indeed I don't know what I should have done without you !'

'Ah—to be of service to madam—it is what I should most like of all the world.'

His manner was really *empresé*. I could not help thinking of all I had read about the susceptibility of Orientals.

'Thank you very much indeed,' I replied. 'Can you tell me how to find the nearest hotel?'

‘*Hotel*, no! In Rajabad there is no such things. There is not in Rajabad even a dâk-bungalow!¹ People is never stopping at Rajabad. It is onlee native town—two miles off. But madam can go to Nuddiwalla, where is Mr. Ockinis——’

‘Mr. Karim Bux,’ said I, ‘how can I walk fifteen miles? There seem to be no conveyances for hire in this place. And then there are my boxes!’

‘Conveyance, no! The road is too bad, simply. It will be to go through jungle and to navigate isstreams—very watery isstreams. Not even byle-gharry² can go on thissy-road. It is for thiss the elephan’ is sent by Mr. Ockinis to bring madam, and these coolies for the boxes carrying.’

‘Do you mean to tell me, Mr. Bux, that my nephew expects me to *ride* that animal to Nuddiwalla!’

Mr. Bux smiled and threw his head back-

¹ Government rest-house for travellers.

² Ox-cart.

ward and to one side with a gesture of reassurance.

‘There will be no harm to madam! The animal is quadruped, but will eat onlee trees—that is all! He will be exceeding *good* steed for madam!’

‘You think so!’ I replied, I fear somewhat witheringly, sitting down on one of my boxes to steady my nerves. ‘You do not realise, Mr. Bux, that I am an English lady who never, even in the days of her remote infancy, was mounted upon an elephant before. To be at the mercy of that animal for fifteen miles!—I will not hear of it! Suppose he buck-jumps! Nothing,’ I went on with some vehemence, ‘can excuse my nephew’s conduct. His only aunt travels six thousand miles to visit him, and she is met by two Hindoos and an elephant. Do you call that proper, Mr. Bux? You are a stranger to me, but I ask you if *you* would have treated a maiden relative in this way? It is—it is simply abominable!’

Mr. Bux joined his two hands together,

as if to supplicate me not to blame him in the matter, and even in that moment of extreme irritation I observed the grace of the Oriental gesture. After my nephew's conduct, it



MR. BUX JOINED HIS HANDS TOGETHER.

was like balm. It occurred to me that, after all, I had no right to blame Mr. Bux.

‘Mr. Ockinis is to-day in *dovta khána*¹

¹ Office-room.

hearing cases, madam. That he should leave Nuddiwalla it is impossible. I myself, I go also to Nuddiwalla. If it is permitted by madam, I walk besides the elephant' and so it will be alright!'

I grasped at the idea which immediately expanded in my mind. 'Can the elephant not carry two?' I demanded.

'Six—eight!'

'Then, Mr. Bux, you must ride. If you will accompany me I will make the effort. If not, here I sit until the next train starts back to Bombay, and by that train I go.'

'If madam will permit, it will be too honourable for me!'

At that moment I observed that my nephew's servant, without my permission, had already sent off three of the coolies with portions of my luggage. The man who carried my leather box, with all my best things in it, was already, it seemed to me, disappearing in the distance. I at once sent Mr. Bux to bring him back.

'These people may be trustworthy,' I remarked, in apology, as he returned, 'and they may not, Mr. Bux. In any case, it is very wrong to put temptation in their way.'



MY BEST BONNET.

I unlocked the box and took out of it my best bonnet, my new black silk, my brooch with my Aunt Julia's hair in it, and a few other odds and ends.

'I suppose there will be no objection to my bringing these with me on the elephant,'

I said, as I relocked the box ; ‘ and now, Mr. Bux, I think we have wasted quite enough time for one day. If that animal is to take me to Nuddiwalla I suppose I must get on his back. Is there a ladder about the premises ? ’

As I walked over to the elephant, with greater unwillingness than I had ever experienced in my life before, the man who sat behind his ears suddenly shouted ‘ *Bite!* ’ I started back in the most horrible alarm, but the animal merely collapsed, slowly and ponderously, into himself, going down on one knee after another, though I cannot undertake to say which pair he began with.

‘ Mr. Bux, ’ I exclaimed, ‘ he told it to *bite!* ’

‘ Oyess, madam—that is native word ! It will be meaning to sit down. The elephant is now took seat. ’

‘ Well, ’ I said, ‘ he is a great deal too high up still. Is there no ladder ? ’

‘ *Ladder*, no ! ’ Mr. Bux replied. Seeing

my hesitation, the man on the elephant again shouted to it, and the creature slowly rolled over on its side so as to bring the howdah



I GOT UPON THE STOOL.

arrangement lower down. I was amazed at its intelligence, but still more afraid to get in. Suppose I should overbalance the elephant!

‘ Here iz, madam ! Here iz ! ’

It was the telegraph clerk, with an office stool—exactly the thing for the emergency. ‘ Thanks,’ I said, ‘ that is *very* good of you. Now the question is,’ I continued, as they placed the stool beside the elephant, who seemed to regard it out of the corner of his eye, ‘ will he stand ? ’ It would have been more exact to say ‘ sit,’ but I was not in the mood for hair-sp!itting. They all seemed to think he would, so I got upon the stool, and Mr. Bux, vaulting lightly up from the other side, handed me in. The howdah was divided by a partition, and there was a seat in each division. I got into the one in front, and Mr. Bux very modestly sat down beside the servant behind. Then the elephant proceeded to get up in the same deliberate manner which he had used in sitting down. It was trying ; the angles at which one was lurched about were so entirely unexpected, but I remained calm ; and, thanks to my presence of mind in putting my feet on my

bonnet-box and holding on to the sides of the howdah with both hands, nothing happened.

During the first twenty minutes of the journey I was too intent upon trying to understand the motion to pay very much attention to the characteristics of the country. One should always endeavour to adapt one's self to one's surroundings, and I gave my whole attention to the attempt to adapt myself to the elephant. To a certain extent I succeeded—that is to say, I gathered that when he used the legs on one side of his body I might expect to be thrown in this direction, and when he used those on the other I might expect to be thrown in that. Beyond this I did not go, and I have nothing to contribute to the theory of elephant-riding except that it should never be undertaken when there is any other way of going.

'Thiss elephan', said Mr. Bux, in the rear, 'it is verry nice elephan' to go—very *easy* elephan'. Mr. Ockinis he has one other elephan', very *discomfortable*.'

I restrained an exclamation. I did not wish to hurt Mr. Bux's feelings by reflecting upon anything peculiar to the country. So I said nothing.

'Madam like it?' ventured Mr. Bux again from the back seat. 'I would be glad if madam like it.'

'I may in time. There are many things in your country to which one must become accustomed, Mr. Bux.'

'Oyessir! The country and the *people* too! All is strange to madam,' and Mr. Bux laughed—somewhat self consciously, I thought.

'I have come to India prepared to take a very deep interest in her people,' I said, as I narrowly escaped being thrown over the elephant's head. 'The Orient has always had a very great charm for me.'

Mr. Bux leaned forward eagerly. 'Yes-sir, that is *noble* idea. And then, I 'ope, madam will take a small interest in me also?'

‘I will see about that, Mr. Bux,’ I replied cautiously. He was really going too far, even for an impressionable Oriental, on so short an acquaintance. I glanced at him a little diffidently, and could not help noticing that his eyes were shining with emotion, behind his spectacles, and that he was nervously pulling his whiskers with one small brown hand, while his green silk cap was pushed quite to one side. I felt a premonition that I was on the eve of a remarkable experience, and gazed dreamily out at the expanses of wild and sunburnt country that seemed to heave before me with the motion of the elephant. ‘Tell me something of yourself,’ I added, and then wondered if I had given him too much encouragement. At that moment my bonnet-box flew open, and with some difficulty I shut it again. I had often heard that in the crises of existence trifles like these make an extraordinary impression, and now I believe it.

Abdul Karim Bux beamed with pleasure.

I could see him beaming, though I did not look round.

‘Of myself there is nothing what I could enjoy more than telling madam every things. I am failed B.A.’

‘What kind of B.A.?’

‘Failed B.A.—not succeeded B.A. In this country B.A. is better than failed B.A., but failed B.A. it is also something. I regret, madam, of the examiners I had one enemy. He will not allow my English. I am also Government servant in the Forest Department. I was born eighteen hundred and sixty, and I am in Government service now it is six years.’

‘That,’ I reflected, ‘makes him thirty-three. Just eight years younger’—but I would not permit myself to complete the thought. After all, what was Abdul Karim Bux to me? I answered myself sternly—a heathen. His mere speaking English and wearing spectacles could never remove this barrier, I told myself.

‘And your family?’ I said aloud.

‘I think I have touched the heart of madam! My father, he is now gone very old. My brothers, I have two fine chaps. They are making their pile in bussiness, and they are always wanting me to come with them. But I am too loyal for that—I like better the Government service. Madam is the ant of Mr. Ockinis? How lucky gentleman, to possess esteem of madam! Madam’s intelligence has conquered my every affection!’

‘You may call me “Miss Moffat,” Mr. Bux,’ said I, looking at him frankly. I thought I might go as far as that.

‘It will place us on a more agreeable footing, and I’m sure I have had every reason to be obliged to you. If you were not my preserver, you might have been—I am sure you would have been, if preservation had been necessary. But beyond this I cannot go to-day. I must have time, a great deal of time, for reflection. The present situation is

far, far too romantic ; and I am obliged to tell you that unless I can accustom myself by the exercise of will-power to the motion of this animal pretty soon, I shall be obliged to get off. So I beg you to say no more to-day.'

Mr. Bux folded both his hands in the vicinity of his heart, and bowed. He looked very, very happy, and for the next quarter of an hour I tormented myself with the idea that I had said too much.

It was a strange ride. The road was narrow and stony, and on each side stretched away either bare grassy plains or patches of low jungle. The elephant took his time, and it was two o'clock before we got to Chotagurh, where there was a dâk-bungalow, and where luncheon, by my nephew's order, was awaiting me. I said grace over that luncheon in a properly thankful spirit. Mr. Bux had brought his with him, it seemed, and I did not press him in the matter when he said he preferred to take it on the verandah. After Chotagurh we entered the forest, and I

realised how adventurous I had been in starting. I was obliged to close my umbrella ; three times my pith hat was knocked



MY PITH HAT WAS KNOCKED OFF.

off by overhanging branches ; and once I became so entangled in a thorny vine that it was necessary to stop the elephant to cut

me loose. I have now a double sympathy for all tropical explorers—I know what they are obliged to put up with. Among my other misfortunes I lost a spotted veil almost new, which cost me one and ninepence at Mrs. Dodd's, and a tortoise-shell comb which I had had for fifteen years. Not that I wish to throw blame on anybody connected with the expedition. The man sitting on the elephant's neck cut down everything he could reach with an enormous knife which he wore in his belt, and whenever a branch was too big for this he spoke to the elephant, who simply curled his trunk round it and snapped it off. Sometimes a tree stopped the way, and I am not exaggerating when I say that the man then gave a different order, and the elephant bent the tree over with his trunk and put his foot on it. I may say that the man, the elephant, and Mr. Bux combined their energies to render the trip an agreeable one, and if they did not succeed it was because tropical nature was too strong

for them. My only real terror, however, was when we were crossing the streams of which Mr. Bux had warned me, and the elephant's feet slipped about among the big stones below the rushing water. It would have been too dreadful to have come thousands of miles by sea to meet shipwreck in an Indian forest.

I suppose I ought to say something here about the wonders of the tropics, but I am not good at describing the beauties of scenery. I had a cousin who wrote poetry, but she died, and no other Moffat was ever known to be sentimental. Besides, it was a great deal more like any other forest than you would expect—trees and thick bushes and vines, and here and there a cleared space. It was very silent, though, and I was glad of Mr. Bux. But for the thoughts he aroused I should have had creepy sensations. I saw neither serpents nor wild animals of any sort—nothing but little yellow butterflies that fluttered along in front

of us, and a bird that called and flew now and then in the distance. Nevertheless, I despair of making you comprehend the singularity of the experience.

At about five o'clock we emerged upon the road again, and a few scattered huts gave an air of life to the surroundings. Mr. Bux, since my command, had been talking of impersonal matters. He now signified the necessity of his alighting.

'In one mile, Miss Eemuffitty, you will be arrived,' he said.

'But why not ride the rest of the way?' I asked.

'Mr. Ockinis—I do not know—Mr. Ockinis may not like that I find favour with Miss Eemuffitty. I think Mr. Ockinis may be jealous that I have touch the heart of his so intelligent ant! I think it will be better madam does not say she has isspoken to me. In a few days, yes. But to-day, no!'

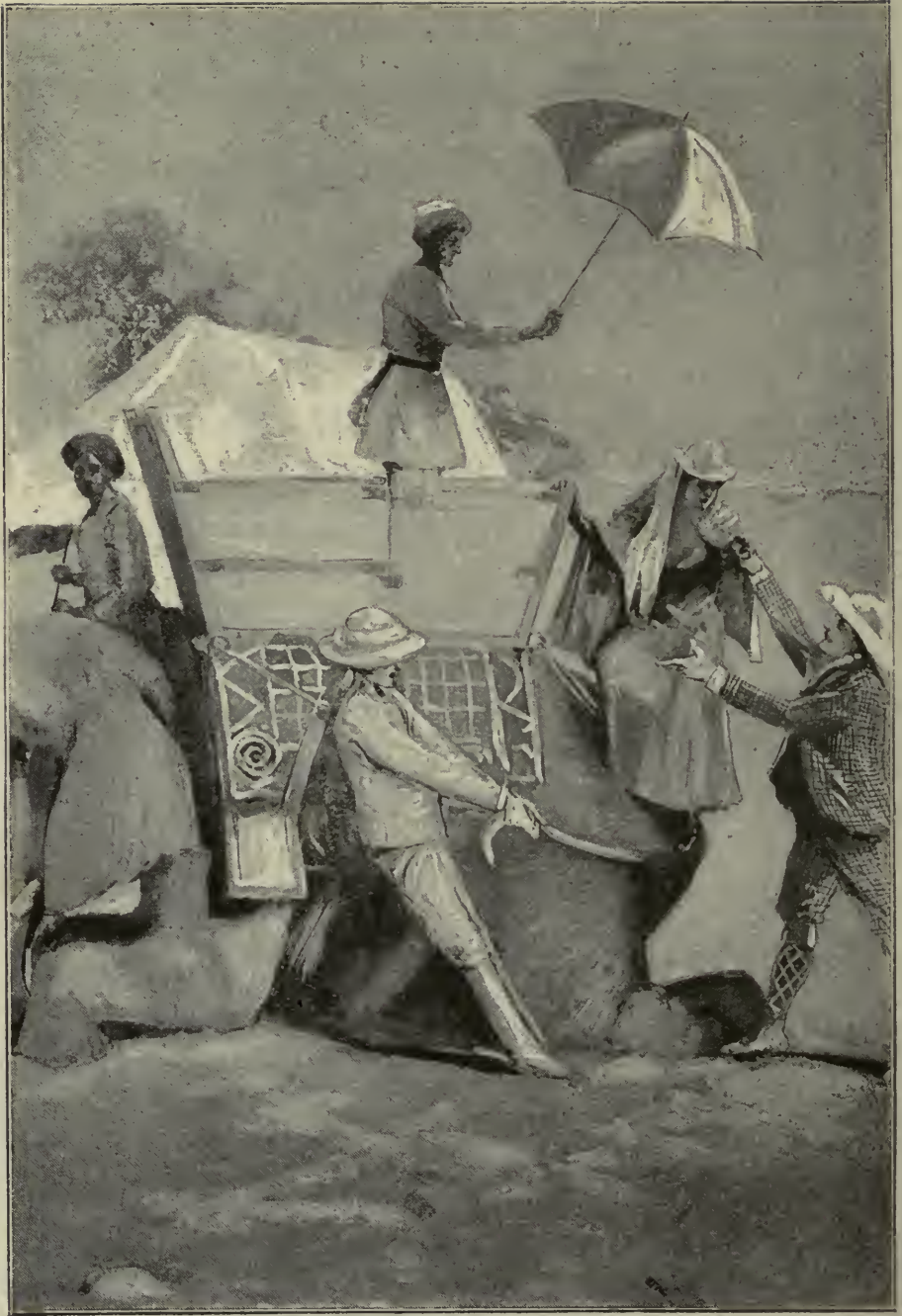
I thought I understood his feelings. 'Very well, Mr. Bux,' I replied, 'I will not

mention it. And—and you may write me what you feel. I will at least keep it sacred.' With this I shook hands with Mr. Bux, and he scrambled down. A quarter of an hour later we approached a wide clear space, with two or three tents dotted about it. A small white terrier ran out barking, and the elephant calmly picked it up with his trunk and dropped it in the howdah beside me, where it continued to bark. Two gentlemen followed the terrier, and as they approached and took off their hats the elephant sat down.

'Well, Aunt Vinnie, this *is* sporting of you!' cried one of them. 'Welcome to Nuddiwalla!'

Doubt fled from my mind; it was Vernon's voice, though he had certainly grown stout. I could have fallen upon his neck. But it was impossible, under the circumstances.

'Yes, Vernon,' I responded, 'here I am, and now the question is how I am to get down. I don't mind telling you that if I had



'PARKER, HOLD HIS TAIL !

known what I should have to go through to get here, I never would have left Littlehampton!

‘Then I’m glad you didn’t know. Parker, hold his tail, will you? This is Major Parker, Aunt Vinnie! Now then, give me your hand, put your foot on his tail—that’s it!—and here you are! *Very* nice of you to come, Aunt Vinnie! And you’re just in time for tea!’

CHAPTER V

I ASK you to believe me when I tell you that, as far as the eye could see, there was not a single human habitation in Nuddiwalla—I don't call tents human habitations. In one direction stretched a wide river bed, all stones and grass, and hills beyond. In the other three, forest and nothing else. The road I had come by ran out of the forest through this cleared space, and into it again, and beside it, in one place a tangle of plantains grew amongst what looked like three or four piles of dead leaves, which I afterwards found to be huts. At a glance you could see that Nuddiwalla was not a social centre of any importance, and from the moment of my arrival I regretted getting my new black silk. By the time I should be back in Little-

hampton it would be completely out of date, and not even a black silk will cut to any great advantage twice.



HE LIFTED THE FLAP.

My nephew was indubitably there, however—that was the great point ; and whatever my opinion of his choice of a place of residence might be, I looked with the most

appreciative gratitude at the mole on his forehead. As he lifted the flap which stood for his hospitable door, and we all went in, I was much more in the mood for my tea than for criticism of any kind, though I saw in an instant that a great deal of it would be required. My nephew was evidently living like a savage. In one corner of the tent were two or three guns and a pair of impudent top boots; in the other a camp bed with all sorts of unblushing garments folded on the top of it. A set of standing shelves, containing books and documents, a camp table, and four camp chairs, completed the furniture of the tent. I took a seat on one of the chairs, and looked round me in silent disapprobation, which Vernon probably put down to fatigue.

‘Well, Aunt Vinnie,’ he rattled on, ‘this is quite like old times. But you might have given a fellow more warning, you know. Camp life is rather hard luck on a lady just out from England. There’s the magistrate

of Jummanugger, up the river—I could have got his wife to put you up for a while, if I'd only known.'

'I didn't come six thousand miles to see the wife of the magistrate of Jummanugger,' I responded firmly, 'and I beg you will do nothing of the kind, Vernon. What you can put up with I can put up with. Do you intend to let that tea get stone cold before you pour it out, or shall I do it?'

'Parker,' said my nephew, 'I could imagine myself a boy again. Aunt Vinnie brought me up! My dear aunt, if you use that tone of voice with me before the servants my influence in the district will be gone. I don't mind Parker here, but I must ask you, as a rule, to bully me in private.'

As he spoke, Vernon handed me a cup of tea and a biscuit, and I proceeded to refresh myself before taking any notice of his nonsense. That is to say, I tasted the tea, walked over to the table, and put down my cup.

‘Vernon,’ I said, ‘if, as you say, I had not brought you up with my own hands, I should suspect you of a plot to poison your aunt.’

‘’Pon my honour, Aunt Vinnie, it’s the same tea I always——’

I held up my finger. ‘Send,’ I said, ‘for the servant who made it.’

‘Moulla Khan!’ my nephew shouted, and the man appeared. ‘Go for him, Aunt Vinnie! He understands a little English.’

The man stood before me, and I felt that the moment for asserting myself as the moral head of Vernon’s household had come. To make myself plainer, I took the cup and emptied its contents scornfully into the slop-basin. ‘This *cha*’ I said, slowly, looking fixedly at Moulla Khan, ‘very plenty bad *cha*. Reason why because, I tell you. Too much *cha* in pot—no boil water.’

The man turned volubly to Vernon in great excitement, joining his hands together as if he were imploring my nephew to save

his life. 'Tell him I won't do anything to him this time,' I added hurriedly, 'but he'll have to make it over again.'

'He says it is made as I always have it,



I EMPTIED IT SCORNFULLY.

Aunt Vinnie, but it may be very bad for all that. And he says that he did make it with boiling water.'

'Rubbish and nonsense Vernon. I'll

thank you to believe that I know when tea is properly made. The water was *not* boiling.'

'Pani boil *hua*,' insisted Moulla Khan, with an injured expression. '*Four* clock boil *hua*! *Albut* boil *pani hai*!'

'What does he say?' I asked Major Parker, who had hitherto modestly kept out of the conversation. He was a little man, very mild-mannered.

'He says, Miss Moffat, that not only has the water boiled, but that it boiled at four o'clock. Therefore, without doubt, it is boiled water.'

'Poor ignorant heathen!' I said, as both the men laughed in what I thought a heartless way. 'He doesn't know the difference. Tell him to bring some tea, and with my spirit lamp I will begin at once to teach him,' and in ten minutes tea was made, Moulla Khan looking respectfully on, which it was possible to drink without risking the entire destruction of one's nervous system.

'Aunt Vinnie,' remarked Vernon, a quarter of an hour later, 'I tremble to show you your quarters, but it must be done sooner or later, and I fancy you would like to lie down or unpack or something. Will you come now?'

We stepped out into the gathering dusk, and I noticed that the place had become populous. Fires were burning here and there, and I could discern people moving about, and horses and cows, while from some obscurity came the familiar notes of cocks and hens. I felt more reconciled and comfortable in my mind, and I did my best to cheer Vernon up over the prospect of having me. 'My dear boy, you needn't worry,' I said, as he gave me his arm over the uneven ground, 'it isn't as though I were a stranger, you know.'

'No,' Vernon confessed, 'it isn't.'

'I am prepared for remarkable experiences. I have become convinced lately that the life at Littlehampton is confining,

and I knew I should find the best contrast to it in the Orient, where you, fortunately, were. I may say that it is my aim to gather up



WE STEPPED OUT.

remarkable experiences, and already I have laid by several,' I added, thinking, not without a palpitation, of Mr. Bux.

'You see,' Vernon interrupted, evidently preoccupied, 'I've never had a lady in camp before, and I had to leave the fixings pretty much to Radabullub. He and the camels went to Jummanugger the day before yesterday, when your telegram came, and he seemed to think he had brought the right sort of things. I had an extra tent, luckily, but it's rather small, as you see.'

It was rather small, and its contents were so various that I thought I would rather express myself about them when Vernon was not there. So I told him I wanted a lamp, and sent him away. Then I sat down on the edge of a rickety folding bed, about two feet wide, and surveyed the circumstances under which I was to take up my abode in Nuddiwalla. There was a small unvarnished wooden table, on four very long and shaky legs, and on the table a large looking-glass and two blue porcelain vases with glass pendants. There was a *prie-Dieu* chair, worked in Berlin wool, a good deal moth-

eaten, and, hanging upon the side of the tent, another looking-glass. The whole of one wall of the tent was occupied by a



I SAT DOWN.

wardrobe with a carved top and mirror swinging-doors, perfectly new. On the ground, which was covered with a coarse

cloth, through which every lump and stone asserted itself, lay what I took to be a footstool, but closer inspection disclosed it a large flannel pincushion, bristling with pins, pins little and big, black and white, pins with blue heads and jet heads and gold heads, a perfectly bewildering assortment. Rada-bullub was acquainted with at least one feminine necessity. As I sat there I heard the sound of rushing water, and, lifting the flap in the canvas partition which divided off the bath tent, I discovered a man, very wet, and nearly naked, filling a tin bath tub with water out of a goatskin. I observed that my ablutions were further provided for by a brass basin, on a kind of high wooden stand, and a large cake of pink soap. While I watched him, the man emptied his goatskin, salaamed, and disappeared through another flap, leaving me to wonder whether I might depend in future upon knowing when he was coming. A portentous cough just outside the tent door brought me back, and there were Vernon

and the lamp, and Radabullub. I knew at once it was Radabullub by the look of



EMPTIED HIS GOATSKIN.

satisfaction and pride upon his face as he put down the lamp, an enormous duplex burner with a hand-painted bowl, in tulips and

humming birds. Vernon looked round doubtfully. 'I *hope* Radabullub has made you comfortable, aunt,' he said. 'He's a pretty good fellow at a *bundobust*,* as a rule.'

'I shall have to get accustomed to it before I can tell exactly,' I replied, 'but in the meantime I don't mind saying that I'm very much obliged to Radabullub for that wardrobe. A wardrobe with looking-glass doors in the middle of the tropical jungle I did not expect to find, and it will simply be the salvation of my black silk.'

'Let him stay and unpack for you,' Vernon suggested. 'Give him your keys and lie down. You must be dead beat.'

'Not on any account. Radabullub has been very useful, but he must run away now. And I'll be obliged to you, Vernon, if you'll put the lamp on the floor in a corner. That table will certainly collapse under it.'

They did as they were told, and I was presently once more alone with this luminary,

* Arrangement.

which shone at me from its corner on the floor like a heavenly body in declension. In spite of it, I felt very low in my mind, and if it had not been for one thing I think I should have given way, at least for the moment. That one thing was the wardrobe. The wardrobe stood there waiting to be filled—a solid, respectable piece of furniture that seemed to civilise the whole of Nuddiwalla. I am not ashamed to write that I drew more moral support from that wardrobe in the earlier part of my visit to my nephew than from any other circumstance that surrounded me. It inspired me in the present instance to unpack all my boxes, and I am thankful to be able to say that, with the exception of my waterproof and an old striped gingham, everything went into it. Dinner was at eight, and in the end I decided to put on my black silk. It was, after all, the best way of getting the wrinkles out.

We were four at dinner, a Mr. Jones, in riding things, having appeared while I was

unpacking. I said I was glad to see him, although he might possibly have read in my manner that I thought he should have given



EVERYTHING WENT INTO IT.

notice of his arrival. He was on his way from something-pore to something-nugger. He had all the familiarity of a relation, and

my nephew and Major Parker called him Jimmy. He was a boisterous young man, engaged in the tea-planting business, and I saw at once that he would have to be curbed. We sat round the camp table, which was



HAD TO BE CURBED.

illuminated by a couple of lanterns tied to the tent pole and furnished with a service of white edged with blue, considerably cracked, and Radabullub and Moulla Khan stood behind our chairs. I was conscious that a great deal devolved upon me, and I am glad

to say that I was able to make my influence felt from the moment we sat down. It was done very simply. Mr. Jones asked me what induced me to take so long a journey alone, and I replied that I had come to throw about my nephew the influences of home. They seemed to understand that, for not another word was said until we had finished our soup. I suppose it was sinking into their minds.

‘I’ve brought back that book of yours, Hawkins,’ remarked Mr. Jones, leaning back and playing with his fork, while Radabullub and Moulla Khan departed into the outer darkness for the next course—‘For a translation it’s not bad.’

‘Translation of what?’ I inquired.

‘Of Aristotle, madam,’ said Mr. Jones. I have always believed that he wished to display his erudition in dragging in Aristotle, but I took no notice of it at the time.

‘Dear me!’ I said, ‘are you driven to Aristotle? You will be glad to hear that

I've brought you something lighter than that,' and I went on to mention the back numbers of the *Sunday at Home*. 'I fancy they will keep you going,' I added, 'for some time.'

'Dear me, yes!' responded Vernon, gratefully. 'For ages, Aunt Vinnie. Have another slice of peacock, won't you?'

'Of *what*?' I exclaimed.

'Peacock—wild peacock. It *was* a cock, wasn't it, Parker? Don't look aghast, Aunt Vinnie, it's quite good to eat—Parker shot it yesterday.'

'Did you?' I inquired of Major Parker. 'I am not astonished—I am past feeling astonishment at anything I experience in this country, but before writing in my diary that I have eaten roast peacock I should like to be quite sure that my nephew is in earnest.'

Major Parker looked rather frightened, but he owned up to the peacock. 'Why, yes, I believe I did,' he said, somewhat shamefacedly.

‘Of course you did, Parker,’ remarked Mr. Jones. ‘I’d know he was your *shikar** if I ate him at the Criterion. I’ve taken six shot out of one helping myself!’

The other two men seemed to find this amusing, but I saw nothing to laugh at.

‘If an animal is to be shot at all it should be shot until it is quite dead,’ I remarked, ‘and if it was necessary for Major Parker to shoot six times at the peacock, I’m sure he was perfectly right in doing so.’

Major Parker turned crimson under my commendation. My nephew looked unusually solemn, and Mr. Jones exploded with folly at his own attempt at wit.

‘There are the tail feathers, Miss Moffat—no end of ’em,’ said Major Parker. ‘If you would like them—ladies sometimes do—I’ll have them salted and dried for you. They’re rather pretty.’

I was about to acknowledge the compli-

* Game.

ment and graciously accept, when I suddenly realised what I was doing.

‘Peacock feathers!’ I exclaimed. ‘I am very much obliged to you, Major Parker, but nothing could induce me to take them. I suppose nothing in the world is as unlucky as peacock’s feathers. I hope you will have them thrown away *at once*. I’m not superstitious, but there’s something about peacock’s feathers that is never known to fail. I *hope* there’s no harm in eating peacock.’

They assured me that this bird was constantly eaten in camp, and that nobody was ever known to be any the worse for it, and among the various other dishes which Rada-bullub offered me I tried to forget having partaken of it. But the memory of it haunts me still, and I only hope that things will stop happening which I can trace, directly or indirectly, back to that peacock.

I was perfectly willing to sit up and chat with them for awhile after dinner, but they all pressed me so solicitously to retire and try

to get a little rest after my arduous day that I consented. A full moon had risen from behind the hills, and under it they made a thin blue shadow along the horizon. One could almost count the big white stones in the river bed, and the little stream that hurried along the middle of it murmured and called as it went in a way that I had not noticed at all in the daytime. Every shrub and tree stood out by itself in the silence; only the long leaves of the plantains by the road waved up and down, everything else was as motionless as if it were listening. The forest on all sides was black in the moonlight, and seemed to have drawn closer round. Far in the distance something cried.

‘What’s that?’ I asked Vernon.

‘Only a barking deer. You’re not nervous about sleeping in a tent, Aunt Vinnie?’

‘If I were I don’t see how I could help myself,’ I responded, ‘but I’m not. At least, I don’t think I am.’

'There isn't the least reason to be,' said Vernon. 'And there am I, you know, as handy as possible, and Parker not twenty yards on the other side of you. Good-night!'

'Good-night! Oh—Vernon!'

'Yes.'

'Wasn't that your dog I saw when I came? Couldn't I have him in the tent with me?'

'Squips? Oh, yes, certainly! But if I were you I wouldn't. If there's one thing a leopard likes, it's a nice fat black and white terrier like Squips. He's had one or two near shaves already.'

'Oh! very well. In that case perhaps I am better without him. Good-night!—Vernon!'

'Well, Aunt Vinnie?'

'It wouldn't take you long, would it, to show me how to manage a gun?'

'Great Scott, aunt! What for? There'll be nothing to shoot—take my word for it.'

Good-night! If you want to be reassured, think of Parker's gun. He's no end of a shikari!' and my nephew strode back to his tent in the moonlight, leaving me holding open the flap of mine, of two minds whether to go after him or not.



MY NEPHEW STRODE BACK.

CHAPTER VI

IF anyone had ever told me that I, Lavinia Moffat, would one night occupy a tent in the heart of the Indian forest, alone and surrounded by wild beasts, I would have considered the person a suitable subject for a lunatic asylum. As it was, on the night of January the 20th, 1893, I thought that this designation might very properly be applied to myself. For there was no doubt about my identity ; there I sat, Lavinia Moffat—if I wanted to assure myself I had only to look at the initials on my brush and comb case—there I sat in my new black silk, which I noticed Mrs. Dodd had gored, though I expressly told her not to, on the edge of my camp-bed, without a gun, and not a sound to break the stillness but the never-stopping

song of the stream over the stones, and the distant barking of the animal Vernon had said was a deer. As I sat there I reviewed my past, from the hemming of my first handkerchief to the day I took over charge of the Littlehampton Dorcas Society, and could not help reflecting that a past less likely to lead to the situation I was in would have been very difficult to conceive. There seemed to have been nothing whatever to prepare me for it, especially in the matter of bedding. Feathers in the winter, horsehair in the summer, and a good spring mattress were what I had been accustomed to ever since I could remember.

I had been insincere with Vernon when he asked me if I was nervous about sleeping in a tent. I was extremely nervous, if not actually alarmed, and in the end I went to bed only because I felt that it was safer on the whole than to sit up. The hours that intervened before I got to sleep I devoted to endeavouring to accustom myself to my

surroundings. The effort was not particularly successful. If it had been pitch dark it would have been easier, but the moonlight made a greyness everywhere, through which the outlines of things suggested themselves indistinctly, and refused to let me delude myself into the idea that I was just dropping off in my own room at Littlehampton. Everything combined, on the contrary, to impress upon me that I was six thousand miles from Littlehampton on a camp-bed in the middle of Asia. As the night wore on the stream became more clamorous, the deer stopped barking, and instead I heard a distant roaring which chilled my blood. It was so far away that I have never been able to satisfy myself from what animal it proceeded, but it might have been anything. Twice stealthy footsteps passed and re-passed my tent, and when that happened I should have lost my self-control entirely if I had not remembered that the footsteps of Radabullub behind my chair at dinner had been equally

stealthy, and that these were also probably on business. A phrenologist once told me that my will-power was very highly developed, and I have ever since prided myself considerably upon it. When I found myself physically unable to turn my head on my pillow from pure fright, therefore, annoyance was added to my other sensations, which had been lively enough before.

Finally I gave up trying to exert my will-power, and it was about this time that I got to sleep. It must have been hours later, for the moon was gone, and the tent was in black darkness, when I awoke in a rigid horror and the knowledge that something shared it with me. I seemed to perceive it with every nerve at once, but in an instant I heard the creature crunching its prey in the middle of the tent, as far as I could judge, about two feet from the table and three from my bed. I despair of making you partake of my sensations, and, indeed, I should not desire to do so. My mind was preternaturally acute

—I knew at once that the animal was carnivorous, and that it had brought the fragments of its last meal to my bedside in order the more conveniently to begin upon me. Without stirring I moved my eyes—carefully, so as to make no noise—and searched every part of the tent with them, but could see absolutely nothing, while the crunching went on with terrible distinctness. Now and again it would cease, and then I lay like an agonised stone, every instant expecting to feel the onslaught of tooth and claw. Presently the animal brought my terror to a climax by getting up, stretching itself, and walking round the tent. In a galvanism of fright I threw both my arms into the air, and cried ‘Whish!’

Then I immediately covered my head with the bedclothes, but through them all I could hear the creature growling and beating its tail on the ground. With the desperation of the situation I realised that I must take action of some sort. It suddenly came into

my mind that wild beasts were afraid of fire, and I remembered the box of wax-matches I had put under my pillow when I went to bed. I had rebuked Vernon for his extravagance in using wax-matches—was one of them to be my salvation now? Where I got the strength or the courage I do not know, but in another instant I had struck a match. It fizzed, exploded, blazed! By its weird and sudden illumination I saw two great yellow eyes and a waving tail. There was a frightful snarl and a bound—two bounds, one of them being mine, out of bed and forth into the night. Before I realised whether I was pursued or not, I was shaking the man in the next tent. I did not consider whether it might or might not be Vernon. I knew it was a man, and any man would do.

When he said, 'What's the matter?' I recognised that it was Mr. Jones, but felt no embarrassment whatever.

There's either a tiger or a leopard in my tent! Quick, get up and shoot it!

‘By Jove!’ exclaimed Mr. Jones, and was out of bed in a moment. ‘May I—may I light the lantern, Miss Moffat?’

‘Yes, you may,’ I returned, for I had



THERE WAS A FRIGHTFUL SNARL.

slept in my dressing-gown for fear of an emergency—a thing I did every night after that I spent at Nuddiwalla.

‘I’ll go and wake Parker,’ said Mr. Jones,



TOOK HIS GUN FROM THE CORNER AND LEFT ME.

when it was lighted; 'we mustn't keep the fun all to ourselves, Miss Moffat!'

Fun!

He took his gun from the corner, and left me with a candle and my reflections. Even in that moment, when my nerves were so strung that they might have snapped like fiddle-strings, I reflected that I had not done Mr. Jones justice—he was a brave, though evidently reckless, young man. Ten minutes passed, during which I heard nothing but the ticking of Mr. Jones's silver watch, which hung from a buttonhole in the waistcoat that lay across the corner of his bed. Then came a shot—voices—another shot! More talking and laughing—I breathed again—they had evidently killed the creature.

Through the opening of the tent I saw the light from the lantern flickering across the ground as the men approached, and I distinguished my nephew's voice jubilant among the rest.

'Have you got him?' I cried from the door.

'*Rather!*' replied the nearest of the three spectres in pyjamas, Mr. Jones.



I SAW THE LIGHT FROM THE LANTERN.

'Come and see, Miss Moffat!'

I went out boldly at this, and they held the lantern for me to look. They had got him indeed—there lay his corpse—but I ask

you to picture to yourself my emotions when I saw that he was only a poor, unfortunate, homeless, wandering *cat*—a cat that might, with better opportunities, have adorned any



‘YOU BRUTES!’

fireside. With an effort I controlled myself. Words were vain. I merely looked at the three assassins, individually and collectively, and said, in a tone of concentrated resentment, ‘*You brutes!*’

Vernon made an effort to justify himself. He said they had been on the

look-out for that cat for weeks : it was the most inveterate thief in the neighbourhood, and nightly preyed upon Radabullub’s pantry, and he produced the mutton bone which the poor thing had been enjoying in my tent as a

proof. I asked him, in return, if he had ever thought of putting a saucer of milk outside his tent, or made any other attempt to reform the cat, and when he replied no, by Jove! he hadn't, I left them, more in sorrow than in anger, and went to bed.

I was awakened in the morning by groans—long, bubbling, horrid sounds of a creature in torment. They proceeded from behind my tent, and were accompanied by excited human voices. Never have I dressed with so little regard for my appearance. I ran out upon the scene without my collar, without my cuffs, actually in my bedroom slippers. I don't know what I was prepared to do, but I immediately realised that there would be no necessity for doing it. The groans proceeded from a camel, by no means a camel in the last stage of dissolution, but a healthy and vigorous-looking camel who was being loaded for a journey. Their heart-breaking character was owing to the length of his throat, and the fact that he artificially

mixed them up with whatever he had last had to drink ; and it did not take a moment's observation to convince me that they were



A HEALTHY AND VIGOROUS-LOOKING CAMEL.

the purest affectation. I have rather an eye for humbugs, and, though I had never seen one before with four legs and a hump, I

marked him. His complaints were absolutely without rhyme or reason, for he had begun them before a stick had been put upon him. He emitted them every five seconds, using the interval to snap at the man nearest to him. He twisted his face round in dignified expostulation, he threw his head back in flat refusal, he stretched out his neck in furious and ignominious resignation. At every fresh object that was put into the baskets on each side of his back he bubbled and groaned as if it were the proverbial last straw—in spite of my discernment of hypocrisy, if I had been loading him he would certainly have imposed upon me. In fact, I was beginning to feel a certain amount of sympathy for him, and to think of interfering, when his driver untied his front knees and the creature lurched up on his four feet. Do you suppose he went on bubbling? Not another bubble! He ambled off as easily and comfortably as you please, and I am almost ready to vouch that as he passed me

with his ridiculous neck at its usual supercilious curve, he looked at me and winked!

I met Radabullub as I went back to my tent, with a letter—a letter addressed to me. The envelope was pink, and scalloped round the flap with an embossed bunch of flowers. The address was in an unknown masculine hand, rather flowing, and the back suggested that a great many efforts had been required to make the flap adhere before any had succeeded. Instantly I divined that it was from Mr. Bux, and scanned Radabullub's countenance, which, however, expressed nothing. I noticed that he followed me into the tent, on the pretence of wanting to take away the lamp, and fussed about until I was obliged to tell him to be gone, for I was determined not to open the missive in his presence. I don't say that I was in the habit of receiving letters of this nature, but I knew enough about them not to do that.

'Leave me,' I said to Radabullub, and

when Radabullub had well left, I calmly inserted a hatpin into one corner of the communication and tore it open. It was



'LEAVE ME,' I SAID.

written upon foreign notepaper with blue lines, and began 'Respected Madam,' which struck me as infelicitous.

‘Respected Madam,—I have the honour to state that all night I have been agonising upon the pillo, and it is not the muskutos nor the bad digestion nor the pangs of conscience that I can account for this. I do not wish to gild refined gold or paint the lilies, but it is the memory of madam’s so gracious language which is my only support in this trying our. Pending sanction, I will speak with Mr. V. H. Hawkins on Friday, 10th inst., but I have the fear that he has prejudice against your most humble slave, and will not hear me in the suit. Madam, my prayers are with you. Kindly judge the thing. Now your neffew has most noble heart, but I think he cannot put up with other man’s collored skin. But skin is not sin.

‘I have the honour to be, sir, your most devotional servant,
ABDUL KARIM BUX.’

I was perfectly collected. Such a situation had never been even suggested to me as a possible experience for a lady traveller in the Orient in search of them, but I made up my mind that nothing should induce me to faint. I confess I did not expect Mr. Bux to be so precipitate. As to his laying the

matter before Vernon, that I could understand in the light of the Oriental custom which requires that everything must be referred to the male head of the household. If Vernon had been my grandson, instead of my nephew, I reflected that my hand would have been solicited with just the same formalities. I read the letter again, and thought of the wonderful insight I was getting into Eastern habits of mind. Then I began to have scruples. Had I any right to sacrifice even a Mahomedan gentleman in a green cap and spectacles upon the altar of my heartless curiosity? For I assure you I had not, even for a moment, thought of becoming Mrs. Bux. Not that I considered Vernon. Vernon, I reflected, would not be likely to object to any alliance his aunt might choose to contract. But my affections were not touched, and I had not waited forty-two years for my affections to be touched to wed anybody who failed to do it, in the shape of a Mahomedan person who, although he wore a coat and

X trousers, probably bowed down to wood and stone. Besides, how could I possibly tell that I should be the only Mrs. Bux ! It seems



PROBABLY BOWED DOWN TO WOOD AND STONE.

to be necessary to be very candid in writing anything autobiographical nowadays, so I will keep back nothing, and confess that my real feeling about Mr. Bux was that, while I

did not want his affection, his admiration was very acceptable to me. I would have liked to be his patroness and improve his spelling, while he should look the homage he dare not speak. This was my sentiment, although it was unworthy of me. I realised that it was also impracticable, and brought out my writing-box to say so.

‘My dear Mr. Bux,’ I began.

‘While I cannot say that you have not awakened my interest, it is my painful duty to let you know at once that you have not won my *heart*, and my *hand* can never be yours. You must not ask my nephew for it *on any account*. Strange as it may appear to you, it is not his to bestow. In case you may feel that I have given you some *encouragement*, I can only say that in England a single ride on an elephant, which was *unavoidable*, would never be considered in that light.’

I read this over, and thought it had a ring of cold indifference, so I added :

‘Your emotions may be painful at pre-

sent, but time will cure them. Sooner or later you will find consolation in *another*. Meantime you may always think of me as *your friend*, LAVINIA MOFFAT.'

I was just reflecting that I had forgotten to say anything about fully realising the honour he had done me, when I noticed that Mr. Bux's letter bore no address. How then could I reply, I asked myself in consternation—how prevent that fateful interview with Vernon? There was no way, absolutely none. My Oriental admirer was doubtless in the neighbourhood, but I could not take long walks in the jungle in the hope of meeting him—I was too much afraid of meeting other things. I could neither trust Vernon's heathen servants, nor make them understand, except Radabullub, who already, I could see, had his private objections to my presence at Nuddiwalla. Clearly, I had no resource but to lock the two letters up in my writing-desk as mementoes, which I did, wondering if some day, when faded and yellow, they would fall

into the hands of my executors and weave a posthumous romance about my memory. I rather hoped they would.

Then I endeavoured to analyse my reasons



I ENDEAVOURED TO ANALYSE MY REASONS

for wishing to keep Mr. Bux's admiration of myself a secret from Vernon, and found that there was, after all, nothing in them, except perhaps a natural shyness, which was per-

fectly absurd with one's own nephew. I concluded, however, not to mention this matter to him until the time came. I have always thought that in a *dénouement* I should do myself justice, and I simply made up my mind to go through with it.

CHAPTER VII

WHEN, during the week or ten days that followed, Vernon questioned me, on account of my pre-occupation, as to whether I was feeling homesick, I flatter myself that I never betrayed the situation by so much as a start or a blush. I told him that his housekeeping gave me a great deal to think of, and that I was engaged in arranging various forms of discipline for Radabullub, which was quite as much as he needed to know. As a matter of fact, Radabullub by himself was enough to occupy the mind for days together. I found that while it was easy enough to take command of Vernon, Radabullub presented difficulties. Radabullub was as amiable and respectful, as intelligent and submissive, as he could be,

but he never by any chance did as he was told. Add to this the fact that he was extremely dignified and distinguished-looking,



HE WAS EXTREMELY DIGNIFIED

and wore a waxed moustache and turban at least a foot and a half high, and you will see that the reproofs one administers to a housemaid in Christendom were simply of no use

with Radabullub. I had to think of others, and it took up a great deal of my time.

It was a trying experience—my effort to reform Radabullub. One of my ideas was that he would look neater in an apron, and I gave him two of my own—large useful checked ones. He wore them only once, in the early morning, both of them tied round his neck and hanging down behind. When I remonstrated he seemed to think I had given them to him to keep out the cold. I never saw them again, and whenever I inquired, Radabullub said they were in the hand of the *dhoby*!¹ The *dhoby*'s hand must have been a capacious member, for everything that was missing was invariably said to be in it. I constantly meant to ask the *dhoby* if it really was so, but he lived three miles down stream, and thus escaped cross-examination. Also, when I told Radabullub to produce him, he had always come and gone precisely the day before. This

¹ Washerman.

made the state of the dusters and dish towels curious. I began by having them brought to me—all that were not in the hand of the dhoby. There were about four, and their appearance was such that I had them taken out immediately, and inspected them as they lay on the grass at a distance. I had never in my life seen anything so sinfully dirty, and the smell of them was like nothing you can conceive except that it might be said to be keyed in kerosene. When I complained of this odour of kerosene to Vernon, he said that the article came as a boon and a blessing to India, whose benighted inhabitants had previously been obliged to lighten their darkness with cocoa-nut oil, and that the import was increasing annually by thousands of gallons. Which is well enough in a way, but my experience went to show that the most valuable economic product could be over-appreciated. This one enters so intimately into the life of the people of India—who do not seem to mind the smell—that

one meets it everywhere. It starts up from one's pillow, it suggests itself in one's chop, it is implied somewhere, probably in the butter, in one's afternoon tea. I told Vernon that I wished he personally would import a few gallons less for culinary purposes, and he referred me as usual to Radabullub.

As to the dish towels I immediately hemmed a dozen with my own hand, and gave them out. Three days afterwards I found the original four still in active use, and Radabullub told me with a virtuous smile that he had sent all the new ones to the dhoby. I found afterwards that, while my deluded nephew paid ten rupees a month to this same dhoby, the money passed through the hand of Radabullub, who had a private arrangement of paying by the piece. The smaller the wash, therefore, the greater the profit to Radabullub—and Vernon could not be made to see the iniquity of this! But, viewed in the light of my discovery, I am now obliged to think that Radabullub told a falsehood about those dish towels.

I am quite aware that a camp is not a house, and that a bachelor is a poor creature to be entrusted with the management of his domestic affairs—I am not unreasonable—but the condition I found Vernon's in was past putting up with. He did not know himself how many servants he had, and when he began to count them over and explain to me what each of them had to do, I lost all patience. He regulated them on only one principle that I could discover, which was that as soon as one of his domestics had a son old enough to make a pretence of being useful he was taken on as 'mate' to his father. Filial respect I knew before to be strong among the natives of India, but I realised it properly when I saw Vernon's parent-cook sitting for long hours smoking his hubble-bubble in the sun, while a young hopeful of about twelve took upon himself the entire responsibility for our dinner. When I spoke seriously to Vernon about this he said that the arrangement gave him

a patriarchal feeling which was agreeable, and that the 'mate' only got half pay! And every horse and cow, every elephant and



A YOUNG HOPEFUL

camel, had its own special idolater to look after it—my nephew's zoological expenses alone came to a scandalous amount! To the end of my visit I was never able to connect

the right man with what he had to do, and I was hourly tried by giving orders to the wrong ones, and seeing Ram Jhan walk away with dignity and call Buldhoo to sweep up the crumbs, or Buldhoo arouse Moulla Khan from his slumbers to put on his turban and slip off his shoes, and bring me a glass of water. Some people might have enjoyed this superfluity—I did not. And it seemed to me no extenuation when Vernon told me that there were two hundred and sixty million people in India, and he had to provide for some of them.

In the very beginning I naturally asked for the keys. There were no keys! I requested to be shown where the tea and sugar were kept, and Radabullub indicated, in one corner of the cook's tent, which was none too big to hold the cook when he squatted—nobody could stand up in it—a wooden box with a lid on hinges. A large stone was placed on the lid, which Radabullub seemed disinclined to remove. He remarked that it

was to keep out the 'billees,' or cats, and his manner said that if he opened the box for my benefit it would immediately be devastated by these animals. When I insisted, he opened the box, but with deprecation.

The tea and sugar were certainly there, in bulk at the bottom, but scattered pretty well over everything. Also the remains of a fowl, half a loaf of ginger-bread, a lot of cold potatoes with green mould on them, a pot of jam, odd bits of cold toast, and about a dozen cigars. Radabullub withdrew these hastily, saying that they were of the sahib, but had gone too plenty dry, and the sahib had given them to him to make a little damp.

'So you put them in the jam-pot!' I exclaimed, with bitterness of spirit.

On the ground beside the box lay the cook's shoes and his pipe, a rusty iron spoon, a tin dish half full of milk, and some onions. The cook's bedding was rolled alongside, and overhead a leg of mutton hung from a rope. Outside, the cook's son hurriedly

tried to pick up some egg-shells and leaves that were scattered on the ground, for fear I should find the establishment untidy! I said nothing, but I think my eye must have been expressive, from the silent and abject manner in which every man among them folded his hands in front of him, and tried to shuffle his toes behind him, and looked everywhere but at me. I said nothing, schooling myself to remember that they were only poor degraded heathen, and had never had a hundredth part of the advantages Jane and Annie had enjoyed in my kitchen; but it was very difficult.

I had come out with the intention of making some jam tarts, and I asked Rada-bullub to show me the kitchen tent, inwardly hoping that there might be a clean table in it, and that I should understand the management of the stove—my own in Littlehampton burnt coal only. A few paces off under a tree two or three heaps of grey ashes smouldered inside as many round ragged

embankments of dry mud. A couple of saucepans lay about aimlessly empty, and a kettle tilted its spout up at the sun, which was putting the last of the embers out. Radabullub remarked that this was the place for the cooking. I controlled myself again, and simply said there was no oven.

‘Without doubt, your honour, an oven is,’ said Radabullub, and they brought me a round rusty tin box, which I have no doubt they buried in red-hot coals in the way of the ancient Britons. But it was not my way. I proceeded to take off the lids of the saucepans, while the cook stood by and accounted fluently for their condition in a tongue which perhaps it was as well for both of us that I couldn’t understand, while Radabullub discreetly withdrew to the shelter of the tent.

The day’s supplies came in while I endeavoured to inculcate into Radabullub some of the first principles of kitchen propriety, and he translated them to the cook, who received them with grave and grateful waggings of the

head. They came in two flat baskets swung by ropes from a stick which a coolie carried



I PROCEEDED TO TAKE OFF THE LIDS

across his shoulders. There were fish and loaves and meat and vegetables, and a bottle of Harvey's sauce, a tin of boot blacking, a



THE DAY'S SUPPLIES

box of soap, some candles, a new razor-strop, and other articles.

‘This man is bangey-wallah, your honour,’ said Radabullub. ‘Twelve miles he comes.’

‘He has a great deal to carry,’ I said.
‘How much is he paid?’

‘His price four annas.’

‘Four annas!’ I cried. ‘That is far too little!’ And I took out my own purse, and gave him eight. The bangey-wallah took it, looked at it discontentedly, salaamed, and said something.

‘What is it?’ I asked Radabullub.

‘He say he comes very far—and your honour gives too little,’ replied Radabullub.

‘These bangey-wallahs they are sons of mud,’ he added cheerfully, and I agreed with him.

I did not make the jam tarts—nobody would have undertaken them under such circumstances. I saw at once that any reform I might introduce would have to be radical, and in order to think about it, I felt obliged to sit down. So I went back to my own tent, and spent some hours in reflection. I worked out an excellent scheme, but I might just as well say here that it did not

come to anything, so I needn't trouble you with the details. It was defeated by curious outbreaks in the families of the whole kitchen establishment, which occurred the first day it came into force. Moulla Khan's grandmother died suddenly, and the cook lost his father, while Radabullub's mother-in-law sent word that she could not live another twenty-four hours, and they all wanted leave to go and bury or burn these departed friends. Vernon said he was very sorry, when I reported the matter to him, but all this mortality was directly owing to my system, and he was afraid it would have to be withdrawn. He said he didn't mind the cook or Moulla Khan, but he never allowed deaths in Radabullub's family—the man was too valuable.

The days wore on, filled for the most part with Vernon's undergarments, some of which had accumulated eleven years of repairs. There were moments, as I sat at the door of my tent manipulating a heelless sock, when I asked myself whether I was really attaining

my object in coming to India—the acquirement of Oriental experiences—Vernon's sock was so very British in its character. Yet when I tried to observe the habits of the



REPAIRS

natives I usually found them in a slumber which offered no points of peculiarity. If they were not asleep, they immediately stopped whatever they were doing at my

approach, and stood up. I could only walk round them and come away. Vernon himself had not Orientalised in the slightest degree. He was even more British than when he left home, but I was sometimes shocked to hear the way he spoke of Parliament. His manners had not improved—he said there were climatic reasons why he should put his feet on the table if I didn't mind. His capacity for family affection was entirely taken up with Squips, and his time with long excursions into the forest on elephants, or interviews with natives, who rode into the camp on little squealing ponies, and sat on their heels round his tent until he should be pleased to see them. I believe he dispensed justice on these occasions, and those who sat on their heels outside were usually culprits. The offences did not seem to me very heinous—their goats had been eating the lower branches of Government forest trees, or they had been cutting a few down to sell.—but Vernon took them as seriously as if he were

a whole High Court, and always put on a coat and the most awful demeanour for the occasion.

Mr. Jones went away the morning after the tragedy of the cat, leaving me a vivid impression of the undisciplined nature of the Indian tea-planter. Major Parker stayed a week, and gave me during that time a daily sensation to which I could not become accustomed. He was at Nuddiwalla, I believe, for the purpose of pure slaughter—a singular aim for such a small, meek, blushing man as he was. And every morning, about ten o'clock, I was startled anew by the advent of the largest and most imposing of the elephants marching into camp, with Major Parker and his rifle wobbling about in the howdah, and a pretty spotted cheetah, or a leopard, and an assortment of wild birds dangling at the animal's side. It was a gory spectacle, and it never ceased to thrill me. Major Parker was not conversational, and I never succeeded in persuading him to feel at



MARCHING INTO CAMP

home with me. He used to make a few timid remarks at breakfast and dinner, and I believe he devoted the time between to repose. I felt, when he went away, that a valuable opportunity of acquiring knowledge of the East had been missed, yet I could not conscientiously blame myself in the matter. I met very few Anglo-Indians who did not leave me with the same impression.

There was certainly no lack of natural history in Nuddiwalla if my nerves had permitted me to study it. But I found it absolutely impossible to accept the elephant and the camel in the capacity of ordinary domestic animals. They seemed to have all the virtues, but they lacked the attractions. They had no endearing ways. They never forgot themselves ; even when the elephants blew trunkfuls of sand over their backs, it did not strike one as frolicsome. Neither could I conquer my aversion to being anywhere in the neighbourhood of an elephant who was not chained up by the leg. Vernon's never

were ; they lived with their mahouts, in a very ineffectual enclosure, on the most free-and-easy terms of intercourse. They were always standing up, too, which struck me as dangerous-looking, though I do not, of course, mean to imply that they never moved. Only when I noticed that one of them was preparing to turn round, I always went away. And they were fed on Christian flour and water, too, baked into cakes, which was another unnatural thing. I wondered, the first time I saw this, that India should have any corn to send out of the country at all. But I suppose the jungle elephants have not yet acquired the taste for a farinaceous diet. The camels, on the other hand, had no particular place to live in, and never stood up a minute longer than they could help. It was, therefore, impossible to walk twenty yards in any direction in camp without coming upon one of these animals, with his legs folded up in sections under him, his head stretched out in vacant philosophy, and his under jaw

moving from side to side in rhythmic union with his reflections. In the daytime one could walk round him, but at night, even with a lantern, he was visionary, problematic, uncertain. I tumbled over one camel in the dark, and it was an experience which neither he nor I will ever forget. It seemed to be a miraculous escape for both of us. Nothing could induce me, however, to make the details public.

There was also a python which tried to domesticate itself, but I am happy to say my nephew drew the line at boa-constrictors. This one made itself comfortable under the ground-cloth of his tent, which undulated one morning, while he was shaving, in a manner that attracted his attention. In my opinion it is to the honour of the family that Vernon *finished shaving*, and then called Radabullub to his assistance, for the undulations were large. Between them they despatched the creature, and I saw the corpse. It was ten black feet long, and as thick as a



THEY DESPATCHED THE CREATURE

man's arm, and there was no reason whatever, except the special Providence which watches over old maids in the tropics, why it should not have crawled into my tent instead of Vernon's. I might mention, too, the centipedes that I found drowned occasionally in the water-jug, and the leaves and twigs and flowers that crept about with legs and antennæ, and the other queer thing in spectacles that sat up and folded its arms, and caught mosquitoes on the tent wall when the lamps were lit ; but while I have endeavoured to fill up the interval, as it were, with these things, I feel that Mr. Bux and the *dénouement* can no longer be delayed.

You may be sure that I awaited further communications feverishly, but none reached me. Once my natural curiosity got the better of me, and I asked Radabullub if any gentleman lived in the neighbourhood by the name of Bux. Radabullub immediately mentioned Mahomed Bux, Ali Bux, Mir Kassim Bux, Moniroddin Bux, and various

other Buxes, but Abdul Karim was not amongst them. I did not press the point, as I felt that since I had taken over the accounts, I could rely still less upon Radabullub. In the matter of the accounts, Radabullub and I represented opposed policies. I was for retrenchment, he was for expansion, and he met my arguments with a skill which dazzled me. If I thought proper to question the price of a joint, for instance, Radabullub would salaam with irritating humility, saying, 'Let it be as your honour pleases; I *gave* three rupees!' indicating a suffering willingness to bear the loss. But while sometimes I was worsted ignominiously, and sometimes we made mutual concessions, there were other times when I triumphed loftily, and Radabullub was abased. Remembering this, I was loth to excite this man's suspicions with regard to any particular Bux, and received his statement about the population at large with apparent indifference.

The *dénouement* is coming.

CHAPTER VIII

I DETERMINED on the morning of Friday, January the 10th, to go about my ordinary duties in my ordinary way, precisely as if Mahomedan suitors were in the habit of arriving every day to ask my hand of my nephew. Vernon saw nothing unusual in my manner at the breakfast-table. I looked carefully at the cup as I handed him his coffee, and it did not tremble. I talked coherently and uninterruptedly about the practice of *suttee* and the number of things that had been missing from the wash. I felt almost callous. If Vernon had sat before me as the arbiter of my fate I should have had less control, perhaps, over my emotions. But he was merely to be the agent of Mr.

Bux's. I had already composed the sentences, on the lines of my letter, in which I should deliver it to my nephew when he came to inquire my wishes in the matter.



I LOOKED CAREFULLY AT THE CUP

The usual ring of offenders sat on their heels round the tent when I left it, while the usual number of disreputable ponies with pink noses snapped and squealed at each

other under the nearest tree. There was no sign anywhere of Mr. Bux. I went into my tent and tried to occupy myself with a newspaper. It was futile. Radabullub came to ask me whether we would have cheetal's liver or jungle-fowl for luncheon. I said cheetal's liver.

'Stay!' I added. 'When Mr. Abdul Karim Bux arrives this morning, let me know, Radabullub.' And he said he would.

For a long time I sat unoccupied, trying to be sorry for Mr. Bux. It was difficult—he had been so very, very precipitate. When at last Radabullub, outside the tent-door, said 'Madam!' I started quite perceptibly. 'Your honour,' said Radabullub, when I appeared, 'Abdul Karim Bux is now with the sahib in the office-khana.'

'Has he been there long?' I asked nervously.

'While one might make a fire of wet chips. And it appears,' added Radabullub, 'that there has been a fault, and the anger of



PONIES SNAPPED AND SQUEALED AT EACH OTHER

the sahib is hot. There is abuse,' said Radabullub, 'and very loud talk.'

I did not hesitate a moment. No unhappy Mahomedan should suffer indignities at the hands of my nephew because of a sudden and foolish, but not unnatural, attachment for his aunt. It was bad enough, I reflected, as I walked rapidly over to the tent, that his affection should be unrequited. I could hear Vernon storming ten yards away. 'It's no use!' he was saying angrily, as I entered. 'You've got no case, and you'd better clear out! I don't know how you dare——'

'What does this mean?' I interrupted, as calmly as I could force myself to speak. 'Is this the way to address any gentleman, however dark his complexion or idolatrous his creed, who comes to you in this capacity, Vernon?'

'My dear aunt——' Vernon began peremptorily, but the instant he saw and heard me, Mr. Bux prostrated himself,

with touching Oriental humility, at my nephew's feet, and copiously embraced them. 'Get up!' shouted Vernon heartlessly. 'Aunt Vinnie, this is a matter——'



MR. BUX PROSTRATED HIMSELF

'In which,' I remarked firmly, 'I have *some* right, I fancy, to be consulted.'

'I say no more words,' put in Mr. Bux,

without moving. 'The noble relative will have ear of the sahib—knowing that I am truth-confessing man. Madam will plead cause of unfortunate person. I am lucky to have favour of Madam.'

Vernon glared at me unbecomingly, and wiped his forehead. 'What do you know about it?' he asked.

'All,' I responded, with perfect calm. 'He has not dared to tell you, perhaps, how he came to my protection at the railway station, and how nobly he kept the elephant at bay. He has not ventured to mention how he assisted me, and accompanied me, and reassured me, during the ordeal of the fifteen miles of tropical waste which I traversed on that top-heavy and dangerous creature! How he told me much about himself and won my interest, if not my affection. Nor has he told you of the pathetic letter in which he set forth all his hopes that I would consent to be his——'

'What!'

Mr. Bux's head and Vernon's feet started apart as if by an electric shock. Vernon stared at me like a lunatic, Mr. Bux gathered himself up, and adjusted his spectacles with trembling fingers. The open door suddenly became full of the heads of the population of Nuddiwalla. Radabullub came in, ostentatiously bearing a glass of water on a tray. Vernon seized the glass, and hurled it out of the door, and his excellent butler followed it very rapidly.

'Mr. Bux has interpreted my silence to mean consent,' I went on, with composure. 'I could not answer his letter, for it gave no address. But there is no hope for you, Abdul Karim,' I added—'none.'

Vernon was tearing up and down the tent like a caged lion, biting wildly at his moustache. Suddenly he turned upon Mr. Bux, who immediately interposed a chair between his person and my nephew.

'Am I to understand,' bellowed Vernon, 'that you have tried to complicate your rela-

tions with the Forest Department by paying your infernal addresses to my *aunt*?'

'Softly, Vernon,' I interposed. 'Mr. Bux has been very respectful.'

'Respectful be hanged!' he shouted. Vernon was certainly very much excited.



INTERPOSED A CHAIR

'Kind sir will not assault humble servant,' said Mr. Bux simply, from behind the chair, 'or there will be damages proceedings, and a fine, which will benefit nobody. I have not the honour to understand.'

I felt annoyed, perhaps unreasonably. 'I will thank you, Vernon, not to impute any interested motives to Mr. Bux in offering me his hand,' I said, with some heat. 'You have no right to do so. I admit the proposal was too sudden—but by this time you ought to know the Oriental temperament——'

I doubt whether my nephew heard me, but I regret to say that at this point he swore, and made a dash at Mr. Bux, who with one bound eluded him. In an instant I had put my person between the combatants, and was doing my best to pacify Vernon, while his unfortunate victim circled round me in a vain attempt to evade my infuriated nephew.

'Respect my corpus, sir!' I heard him beseech, and then, to my horror, Vernon got at him, knocked him down, sat on him, and would have proceeded without doubt to utterly demolish him had I not thrown myself on my knees beside them, and forcibly interfered. As it was, Mr. A. K. Bux's



KNOCKED HIM DOWN

spectacles were broken, his luxuriant whiskers filled with dirt, and his clothes in a state not fit to be seen.

‘I do *not* understand,’ repeated Mr. Bux, with astonishing blandness, ‘but there will be damages proceedings. Madam is witness, also all the servant folk,’ he added, glancing at the door.

My nephew took two strides in that direction, and in an instant not so much as the turban of a spectator was left upon the scene. His attempt to inflict bodily damage upon Mr. Bux apparently calmed him.

‘This must be looked into,’ he said sternly. ‘Where is his letter?’

‘Here,’ said I, producing it from my pocket. ‘And remember, Vernon, in reading it, that while Mr. Bux is by no means uneducated, he has not had your advantages, and naturally expresses himself differently.’

‘Calcutta University,’ murmured Mr. Bux humbly. ‘Failed B.A. Most intelligent ant!’

If I may be excused I would rather not enter into the details of the scene which followed. Vernon read the letter through, and then burst into a violent, ungovernable, and unbecoming fit of laughter, which will cost him, unless I relent, four hundred a year for the term of his natural life. When he had dried his eyes and held his sides for a few minutes, he turned to Mr. Bux, to my amazement, with a smile.

'Abdul Karim,' said he, 'there has been a—a slight misunderstanding.'

He hesitated, reflected a moment, and then drew a sheet of foolscap toward him, took a pen, and went on:

'I have now decided to take down in writing your explanation of the matter about which you have called to see me. H'm!'

'I can explain perfectly to your honour's satisfaction of all the charges,' said Mr. Bux anxiously.

'You are the forest-ranger at the Balligurri outpost. When Luki Lal Beg cut and

deported sixty maunds of sâl above his contract, why was it that you did not report the matter ?'

'Your honour, I was for ten days smitten with a pleurisy of the vital centres, and knew nothing of it. I give my word no money passed into my hand. Not so much as *one* pice.'

Mr. Bux prepared again to embrace my nephew's feet, but Vernon, writing, stayed him with his hand.

'It is enough,' said he. Mr. Bux's eyes sparkled intelligently.

'You will produce a medical certificate to that effect,' added my nephew.

'Oyessir! Being poor man, I was not attending the doctor at that time. But I can supply medical certificate from native doctor all the same. It is small charge only.'

Vernon bit his moustache.

'And as to the pasturing of fourteen goats of Hossein Ali, and eleven cattle of Muckdoom Bux, your uncle, and your brother's son, without a license, either of them ?'

‘ Now I pray your honour to consider this. About that time came news of wild elephant, very strong tusk-wallah, making many misdemeanours with the millet crop of Ramasawmy on the other side of the stream. Every night he was coming and rolling in the millet, and Ramasawmy he was reaching to the brink of perdition. So always I was going to Ramasawmy with my gun, and waiting the whole night for that elephant. Therefore, in the daytimes, I was issleeping when those goat and cattles came to eat, and yesterday both these evil men obtained license at my command.’

‘ Did you get the elephant?’ asked Vernon, with wonderful suavity.

‘ Your honour, how could I do it? There was but the one gun, and moreover Ramasawmy wept when I spoke of the killing. Those Hindoo, they will kill nothing. But I fired the gun, and always then he would go away.’

‘ That will do,’ said Vernon; ‘ you had a very bad case, Abdul Karim, but, as you

see, this lady has interceded for you, and I am inclined to consider her representations. See that none of these things happen again.'

'Certainly not, sir. And I, sir, will not institute damages proceedings——'

'I wouldn't, if I were you.'

'But sir, there is cost of spectacles, three rupees eight annas——'

'By all means. Here you are! Now you have leave to go.'

Mr. Bux caught the coins as they rolled off the table, salaamed humbly to Vernon, even more humbly to me, and departed into the outer sunlight an exploded ideal. Vernon toyed with his watch-chain, and a somewhat awkward silence asserted itself between us. 'I suppose you understand,' he said at length.

'Oh, yes,' I said, 'I understand; you needn't explain.'

'Fortunately, *he* didn't,' reflected my nephew audibly. 'Otherwise I shouldn't have been able to avoid his bringing me up

for assault, and having to explain in court why I kicked him. Gad!' exclaimed my nephew. 'How Jummanugger would have buzzed!'



SALAAMED HUMBLY

'Vernon,' I responded, 'do not dwell upon it.'

'I won't. But you see how it was. The fellow expected you to make inquiries, of

course, and interest yourself in him. And the magistrate would have found that you had taken the man up on insufficient——'

'Vernon,' said I, 'since my affections did not become involved, the matter is not of the slightest consequence. I wonder you do not see that.' And I rose to leave him.

'I don't know,' he returned; 'if I haven't been compounding a felony on your account, it's more by good luck than good morals.'

When I reflected upon this it seemed to indicate that my influence upon Vernon's higher nature had been the reverse of what I intended. Perhaps this was not much in itself, but the next day my nephew announced that Mr. Jones and four other planters were coming to Nuddiwalla for a week to shoot, and that they were all going to bring their own elephants. This convinced me that it would be inexcusable to leave the Orient without seeing more of it than I had, and that it was my plain duty to

expand my experiences. I broke it to Vernon as gently as I could.

'I was afraid,' said he sadly, 'that camp life in this country wouldn't suit you, Aunt Vinnie!'

'Yesterday,' I said, in reply, 'I found a brown hairy scorpion as big as a crab, with six little scorpions on its back, in the crown of my bonnet, Vernon. Last night a rat ate off the whole middle finger of each of my best black kid gloves. And this morning I surprised Moulla Khan making the toast for chota hazri.¹ He was buttering it with a small *brush*, Vernon—I don't say what kind of a brush, but it had a white handle. I fear you are right. It is difficult at my time of life to become inured to this country.'

After that I travelled largely, and my diary is full of the most valuable records of what I saw at such places as Cawnpore, Benares, Delhi, and Calcutta. I visited twenty-seven mission schools, forty-three

¹ Early breakfast.

temples, eleven native bazaars, an opium factory, and the Taj; and I have a book of photographs which now forms the great attraction of my afternoon teas at Littlehampton. Mr. Grule, who 'manfully succeeded in evading Letitia Bray in my absence, declares that with their help my conversation enables him to realise the East perfectly. Our book club has four volumes of travels in India by different authors, however, who seem to have noticed exactly the same things. My earlier experiences appear to be the only ones which have not been published before. It may seem unnecessarily modest on my part, but that is the reason I have confined myself to Nuddiwalla.

This morning a very curious and interesting thing happened, which lends itself, as the novelists say, to the purpose of this narrative in the most wonderful way. Perhaps it would be better to write 'may lend itself,'

for at present I have of course only my own surmises and convictions.

I was coming out of Mrs. Dodd's shop with a dozen bone buttons and three yards of long-cloth, my imagination entirely taken up with next day's work-party, and the bell had rung sharply behind me as I closed the door. A gentleman stood in my way, leaning on his stick and looking earnestly up at Mrs. Dodd's sign. It seemed an unusual thing to take an interest in, but I dare say I should have walked round him in the ordinary manner, if I had not been struck by something familiar in the curve of his shoulders and the reflection of his spectacles. For one instant I hesitated. India and a dramatic situation flashed back upon me. This was not Vernon—no mole visible—never had been Vernon. I knew him—James W. Jamieson, at whose hands I once—— But simultaneously I recognised that he was in mourning, and decided to bury my wrongs and bow.

He recognised me instantly and held out an eager hand. I remembered his impulsive character and took it gingerly.

‘Then you are still here!’ he ejaculated hurriedly. ‘The other is—is not!’

I could not pretend to misunderstand him, and I offered what condolences I could frame upon the spur of the moment.

‘Doubtless,’ I said, ‘she is better where she is.’

‘Oh, certainly!’ he responded; ‘I am quite sure of that. I superintended all the details myself. It is a nice situation, and the monument is very chaste.’

I remembered that it is a virtue in official circles to be literal.

He looked at me attentively again—quite in his old manner.

‘You are the image of her, madam,’ he said. ‘As she was. In earlier and happier days.’

‘And you,’ I replied, ‘are not an atom like Vernon. As he was or is. At any time whatever. I don’t know how I could

have made such a preposterous mistake. If you hadn't——' but there I paused. It was impossible to remind Mr. Jamieson of that public embrace, at the memory of which my cheek still burned.

He was evidently thinking of the same thing.

'Yes,' he responded. 'If I hadn't'—and then after a period of reflection he added calmly:

'On the whole, it is perhaps as well that I did.'

I gasped, but he had fallen into step with me.

'It will be easier,' he went on absently, 'to accomplish again. If it should be necessary. If it should be necessary. May I ask in what year you were born, madam?'

'I was never good at dates,' I replied, passing my hand across my forehead.

'Just my wife's age!' he exclaimed with unconcealed satisfaction. 'Were you asking me how I came to be in Littlehampton, madam?'

‘No,’ I said, ‘I was not. Pray do not be precipitate.’

‘I came,’ he said, disregarding me, ‘to revive the melancholy interest the place has for me in connection with my wife.’

‘Your wife never lived here!’ I returned with some asperity, for this was not what I expected.

‘But you did,’ he rejoined, with an absent look at me.

‘Surely I have not again to persuade you——’

‘No,’ he interrupted hurriedly, ‘certainly not. You were not she. On that point I yield. But it was so very much the same thing. You might have been. You might be!’ We were approaching Holly Cottage. Involuntarily I hastened my footsteps, with downcast eyes. ‘If you knew the difficulty I experienced in becoming accustomed to Mrs. Jamieson,’ he continued pathetically, ‘you would interpose no unnecessary obstacle.’

We reached the gate, and to conceal my emotion I opened it.

‘For the next few hours I shall be cutting out, Mr. Jamieson,’ I said, with reference to the work-party, ‘and that is an occupation for which I must have an untroubled mind. But I shall be at home in the afternoon.’

‘May I come to tea?’ he asked.

‘Do,’ I responded, reflecting with satisfaction that this was the baker’s day for fresh crumpets. So he is coming to tea.



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